[adjective][species] Retrospective Year 2

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Part I

Introduction

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

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Part II

The [adjective][species] Retrospective, Year 2

Chapter 1

November

1.1 Furries With Physical Disabilities

For many furries, there are big physical differences between their real-world bodies and their preferred avatar. We often act as if our animal-person representation really exists: we might consider the logistics of tails, we might miaow or bark a greeting, we might assume personality traits that reflect our perception of our species.

Such roleplay is central to the furry experience for many people. Online, furries commonly present as their animal-person avatar and will socialize as if everyone else were their fursona. This behaviour translates, to an extent, to real-world furry spaces, from one-on-one meetings through to conventions.

This 'fursona illusion' occurs regardless of how closely our real body matches our avatar. For those furries who feel their real-world body doesn't reflect their self-image, this can be a liberating experience. And for furries who are physically disabled – perhaps wheelchair bound – it has the potential to transcend their disability.

People who are physically disabled have a challenging life. Most obviously, they may be physically restricted by a society that is set up for the able-bodied. However restrictive, this is less of a problem from a mental perspective, and more a logistical puzzle that needs to be solved. This is particularly the case for those who are congenitally disabled, and so experience physical restrictions as 'normal'.

More subtly, and more importantly from a mental point of view, is that physically disabled people are treated differently by able-bodied members of society. Anyone who physically presents in an unusual fashion – weight, race, clothing, anything – will tend to suffer from the same prejudice, where other people become unsure of how to engage in social contact. This is not to place blame: it is simply human nature. (I'll discuss the psychology of this prejudice a little further down.)

Research shows that the well-being of the physically disabled is strongly correlated with their sense of community engagement. Efforts to improve the lives of the physically disabled therefore often focus on social aspects. This is the target of public awareness campaigns with slogans like "see the person not the disability".

Furries pay less regard to physical appearance. We are used to treating fellow furs as if they were their animal-person avatar. The furry world, then, may provide a social environment where physically disabilities are less relevant.

I chatted with three physically disabled furries who were happy to share their experiences inside and outside the furry community. These conversations took place over text and are edited for clarity and length.

BlooCat (IBloo on Fur Affinity) is a UK fur with muscular dystrophy and a wheelchair, who might be described as a garden-variety furry:

> My fursona is just a cat representation of myself. By that I mean she shares my name, age, personality etc. Having my fursona do things I can't do is fun, but sometimes I don't like it because it feels less me. My disability isn't all I am, but it's also not something I feel that I want to get rid of.

BlooCat's physical disability is obviously restrictive, and she finds that people are often unsure of how to react when she meets them. This awkwardness is also experienced by **Shorebuck**, an Australian fur who is very mildly disabled – he has diplegia, a form of cerebal palsy. He isn't physically impaired in any significant sense and doesn't consider himself to be disabled, however his diplegia affects his gait, "giving off the appearance of a limp – or dancing".

Despite the irrelevance of his condition from a physical point of view, Shorebuck still suffers:

> Socially, it affects a lot. Some people have been freaked out by it, and some couldn't give a crap. Some people look away when they see me.

The story is similar amongst the more severely disabled. **Nornhound** is wheelchair-bound fur with a rare condition called Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva (F.O.P.), which causes painful unnecessary bone growth in her muscles.

> To a complete stranger, I am certainly known as 'the disabled kid/teen/adult woman', and these strangers treat me differently from an able-bodied person. When I was in my early teens, strangers would automatically assume I had an intellectual disability, and treat me as such. They were often hostile, too.

This initial awkwardness doesn't occur in the online world: physical disabilities become invisible and, from a social point of view, mostly irrelevant. The internet also provides tools that can reduce the logistical challenges posed by an able-bodied society, such as online shopping, and opens different employment opportunities. Largely due to these factors, research shows that the internet improves the wellbeing of the physically disabled (Ref).

It's not all good news. As will be clear to anyone who has spent time reading forums and comment threads, the internet can be corrosively negative. This has a greater than average impact on physically disabled people, because they are more likely to rely on the internet. Furthermore, use of the internet for escapism – such as online gaming – also has a negative impact on the wellbeing of the physically disabled (Ref).

From this research, it can be inferred that the online world provides the greatest benefit to the physically disabled when it is social and enjoyable. The furry community may provide this, and

more – the online furry world translates, in part, into the real world, because of the persistent 'fursona illusion'. If you are physically disabled, engagement with the furry community may lead to a better offline social experience, because furries will tend to see the animal-person alter ego.

BlooCat:

> The physical barrier is more easily overcome with furries. I find a lot of non-furries are a lot less tactile with me than they would be with other people. Something that really struck me at a recent convention was the amount of people (even strangers) that would come up and ask for a hug.

Shorebuck:

> I'd say the furs just accepted me [as an arctic fox named Shorebuck] – that was the main focal point. 'You are this fur, pleased to meet you.'

The initial awkwardness experienced by many people when meeting someone physically disabled may be less common among furries, but it still exists. This is an unavoidable outcome of our human nature as social beasts.

In the furry and non-furry worlds, social groups tend to act as a kind of meritocracy. We tend to socialize with our peers: people who occupy a comparable position in life. The process of peer group selection is driven by our desire to 'fit in' – we tend to change our own behaviour towards the group's behaviour; outsiders who meet or exceed the group's standards are welcomed; outsides who fail to meet the group's standards are rejected.

This phenomenon of normalization is clearly demonstrated by a 2007 study that tracked the incidence of obesity within social groups over a long period (Ref). The results showed that social norms have a very significant impact on obesity risk: essentially, that fat people tend to have fat friends. The results do not strongly suggest (as was reported in the media) that having fat friends can cause you to be fat; more that fat people are likely to find and keep equally generously-proportioned friends.

Such normalization of peer groups occurs everywhere in human society, with the criteria varying depending on the nature of the group. At its simplest level, people tend to have peers that are a similar age. To choose a few examples from the furry world: skilful artists are likely to hang out together, strong programmers are likely to hang out together, and furries with similar sexual interests are likely to hang out together.

This unsaid enforcement of social norms is a natural process, but it can have negative consequences if you are different. Furry is a broad church – geekiness, gayness, intelligence, introspectiveness, etc – and accordingly many furry readers of this article will be familiar with how someone

different can fail to 'fit in' to a social group. Or, to put it another way: the girl in the wheelchair isn't going to catch the eye of the captain of the football team.

The feeling of awkwardness felt by many when meeting someone physically disabled is normal. It is rooted in the same psychological phenomena that lead to peer group normalization. When we meet someone unusual, we are unable to draw upon on an unconscious 'social script' that we use with our regular peer groups. This causes us to engage our conscious mind: we ask ourselves "what should I say". This leads us to think about how we are being perceived (psychologically, we become 'self aware'), which can make us awkward and anxious. It's the same process that makes teenage boys nervous around teenage girls.

These feelings of anxiety are unpleasant and can provoke someone to withdraw from a conversation. This is frustrating for the physically disabled person, who sees it all the time. Unfortunately there is no easy way to overcome this initial conversational hurdle, no fallback social script.

BlooCat:

> I know it would be a lot easier if there could be a set script, but it's a very personal thing. What I think is okay, someone else may not agree with. Take for example another girl in a wheelchair I know, we had a discussion about how we feel about people touching our wheelchairs when we're in a bar or something. Her view was that it shouldn't be touched as it's your personal space. For me I don't really mind if someone leans a bit on my chair, it's just a chair. A fancy bar stool even.

> The same applies for when you meet a disabled person for the first time. I think people just need to disregard the disability/wheelchair. Think of it as meeting a person rather than a disabled person.

1.2   Furry as an Alternative to Religion

Furries are a diverse bunch.

Our diversity means that we're often excluded from the mainstream. This is particularly evident in our sexual preferences – only about a third of us identify as 'heterosexual' or 'mostly heterosexual' (Ref). Other traits displayed by some furries – gender dysmorphia, heavy internet usage, or even simple geekiness – can also play a part in our diversion from society's definition of 'normal'.

Not surprisingly, furries do not closely embrace religion, a societal construct that can embody and tacitly enforce the norms of the mainstream. A little more than 50% of furries are essentially areligious (Ref). This rate is about five times higher than for the wider American population (Ref).

Furry provides some of the benefits of religion – I identify two in this article, loosely defined as 'spirituality' and 'community' – that provide insight into how mainstream society might react to the challenges of our changing world. Furries embody some of the biggest challenges to religion in the twenty-first century: acceptance of diversity, the growing online world and, most importantly, the increasing rejection of religion altogether.

Religion is rightfully a sensitive and important topic. But before I go any further, I want to make two pre-emptive apologies.

Firstly, an apology to the religious, who may reasonably find this article offensive. I'm making a direct comparison between furry and God. To suggest that something as trivial and fleeting as furry can, and should, be compared to a deity would be ludicrous if I wasn't so sincere about it. And possibly even worse, I'm also making an unsaid comparison between this article here on [adjective][species] – my interpretation of furry's morals – and a holy book – a divine interpretation of God's morals.

Secondly, an apology to the atheists, who may reasonably find this article condescending. Religion is an imaginary construct, so it's ridiculous to give it any sort of regard beyond lip service. I'm being respectful towards belief systems that are demonstrably false instead of talking directly about the topic at hand.

These competing paradoxical reactions make writing this article potentially a lose-lose situation. It's also one of the reasons why religion is such a difficult topic outside of conversations with like-minded people. The godly and the godless often see each other as the enemy: they respectively speak in ways that insult the other's philosophy. It's fertile ground for misunderstandings and angry escalation.

This article is intended to explore how our ad hoc furry community provides support to its adherents in much the same way as religious communities. I am not exploring theology.

For starters: furry is not a religion. As far as belief systems go, furry is reasonably comparable to totemism, a broad term covering those who believe they have a connection or kinship with a non-human animal. Totemism has been documented largely in indigenous populations in North America and Oceania, and a modern version of it still exists.

Modern totemists will often identify a 'spirit animal', with whom they feel a close personal connection. That spirit animal is usually imbued with superpowers that give strength to the totemist. These powers are often described as a result of the animal's existence in a spirit world, from which they can provide guidance or provide literal physical support to the totemist.

Modern mainstream totemism (sometimes called animism) is considered to be a new age philosophy, along with other artifices appropriated from a range of cultures. Your patience for such quasi-spiritual guff will vary: your reaction to the usefulness of dreamcatchers, or perhaps your thoughts on the wisdom (or otherwise) of Chakotay from Star Trek: Voyager, might be a good guide as to whether totemism is for you.

If it sounds like I'm unfairly poking fun at modern totemism, I'm also poking fun at myself. I'm personally inclined towards a lot of this new-agey stuff – I'm vegetarian, I meditate, I'm a hypnotist, I own a lot of ambient music – although I would argue that I've appropriated useful aspects of newageism and discarded the dreamcatchers. I've read a fair bit on totemism and I wish I could recommend a good reference – probably the least worst is Ted Andrews's Animal Speak (link), although there is a lot of nonsense to wade through, such as the author's insistence that his personal eagle totem can disable highway speed cameras. If you can tolerate such intellectual bankruptcy, then the book is otherwise a pretty good reference for furries looking to reflect on their relationship with their species of choice. You could, unfortunately, do worse.

Having said that, totemism and real religions – and furry – help us manage our inner world. The totemists and the religious both provide an 'other' – a spirit animal or a God – that allows us to explore the most difficult aspects of the human condition. At the simplest level, using this 'other' as a sounding-board makes it easier to negotiate a route towards happiness, or acceptance of mortality, or manage personal failure. The presence of this 'other' means that we do not have to carry the mental load of complete personal responsibility.

For the areligious, furry provides an alternative for managing our internal world.

All human beings carry around an internal critic that thinks and acts in a way that is often contrary to the rational, moral being we imagine ourselves to be. We all hear an internal voice that reminds us of our permanent failure to live up to our own expectations. We all secretly struggle with depression, or lovesickness, or anger, or mortality, or whatever our own inner voice's favourite topic happens to be.

This inner voice is believed to be the cause of auditory hallucinations. People who 'hear voices', as is commonly associated with schizophrenia, may simply feel that their inner voice

isn't their own. Among the rest of us, our inner voice can still make itself known. We may find ourselves acting on otherwise repressed impulses when we are in a mentally delicate state, perhaps drunk or under stress.

The struggle to manage this conflict between our inner voice and our desire to be a perfect rational being is, for many philosophers, at the core of the human condition. Some people might over-manage their atavistic impulses and become uptight, while others might under-manage and become emotionally unpredictable.

To a religious person, a deity often represents a perfect and unattainable ideal who rewards those who try to improve themselves. This provides a motive force for the internal struggle, providing meaning as one strives towards self-improvement.

Our furry selves may help in a similar fashion. For many furries, the animal-person alter-ego represents an unattainable ideal, mentally and physically. Other furries may imbue their avatar with desirable qualities, and roleplay as a first step towards self-acceptance. The fact that our avatars are not human may be helpful, in that we can never feel like we have reached our destination, much in the way that a man can approach but never attain godliness.

Furry also provides social guidance. We do not have anything as formal as a set of commandments, but we're still subject to unsaid norms that inform the boundaries of appropriate behaviour within the community. For example: furries place great value on tolerance; our friendships are more intimate; we talk freely about sex and sexuality.

These unsaid furry standards are explored regularly here at [adjective][species]. However they are difficult to pin down: I suspect that a non-furry reading these pages wouldn't gain much understanding about what furry 'is'. In general, we tend to discuss common experiences (Rabbit on Fursuit Magic) or explore unusual phenomena (Makyo on furry's dearth of women, Eighty-Twenty) but we tend not to try to define 'furry'.

It's not through lack of trying, just that we furries aren't easily categorized. I might propose, for example, that all furries have an animal-person alter-ego, that we create and name a furry reflection of ourselves. However this is neither mandatory nor universal – [adjective][species]'s very own Rabbit, aka Phil Geusz, doesn't interact through an imaginary furry representative. (Having said that, his books are very 'furry', particularly so if you are inclined towards bunnies.)

We have also explored apparently simple topics, like species selection. Assuming that, say, furry wolves must have different motivations for species selection from furry foxes, we hoped to find evidence in the Furry Survey data. However several creative data-mining attempts have discovered almost nothing. I can think of exactly one significant correlation related to species: furry women are much more likely to choose a domestic cat for their fursona. (Ideas for future searches are welcome.)

The spiritual aspects of religion are difficult to pin down as well. Taking Christianity as an

example, the world has changed to a point where the bible has ceased to be a realistic reference for behaviour. (Atheists sometimes suggest that failure to adhere to the word of the bible is proof that it's at least partly false. I suspect that Christians roll their eyes at this criticism.)

The world is always changing, a process that become very rapid following the industrial revolution some 200 years ago. Huge increases in efficiency and income have led the world's population to increase from about 1 billion to today's 7+ billion, largely away from rural communities and into urban centres.

Religion has had to adapt to this change. Before cities started growing in the nineteenth century, people related to their religion at a community level. The church was at the heart of the community, a role perhaps comparable to that of the government today (as illustrated by the Soviet Union's attempt to enforce universal atheism).

Population growth and the rise of the cities has changed religion. The paradigm of a community church has foundered in the wake of cultural diversity, social diversity, and – more recently – the advent of the internet. Furry is less than 30 years old and so has easily adapted to the twenty-first century. Most religions have centuries or millenia of history: they were once described to me as like an oil tanker, in that they take a long time to change course. By that metaphor, furry would be a speedboat.

While the spiritual aspects of religion haven't appreciably changed over this time, the community that once centred around a church has. In diverse cities, church-based community will necessarily be relatively monocultural compared to the greater population. This disconnects you from your citymates, a disenfranchisement from society.

If the inhabitants of a city are not engaged with one another, it can lead to weakening of the social contract. This causes problems on a personal level – a city can be lonely – and on a wider level – illustrated by the 2011 London summer riots. The furry community provides a solution, at least on a personal level.

Our mutual engagement in the furry community brings us closer together. The social contract within furry is strong: we freely offer shelter and company to furry strangers (The Furry Accommodation Network); we offer moral support to the depressed (A Rough Guide to Loneliness); when furry strangers pass away, we are personally affected and provide charity (Death in the Fandom). This sense of community is very similar to that traditionally provided by religion, bringing an entire community together, allowing the strong assist the weak.

The communal furry experience is more tangible than the spiritual side. Unsurprisingly, we at [adjective][species] regularly write about the furry community's actions, and those articles are almost always the most interesting to read. So, if you've read this far, thanks – I hope you didn't just read to the end so you can comment and berate me for being offensive/condescending [choose one].

1.3   Carroll Ballard's *The Black Stallion*

The Black Stallion, Carroll Ballard's 1979 debut feature, is a great film.

It's based on a series of children's books but isn't simplistic or pandering. It's meditative, beautiful, engaging and – of course – great for any furs with an affinity for our equine friends.

The movie opens with a young boy, travelling on a foreign ship with his father. The ship is carrying the titular black stallion, a beast with a questionable temperament and unquestionable power.

There is a storm. The boy frees the horse from its restraints before both are thrown overboard. The ship sinks. They find themselves on a deserted island as the only apparent survivors, marking the end of the prologue and the beginning of the movie proper.

The first half of the film is a nearly wordless tale of survival. The weathered pastels of the island and the primary blue of the ocean are stunning. This landscape acts as an ancient canvas for the emerging relationship between boy and horse.

Ballard allows the story to develop naturally, with long scenes showing the boy adjusting to his wild surroundings. Such unhurried minimalism is comparable to the quiet, tense scenes of exploration in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): the boy's quest for survival has parallels in Kubrick's apes discovery of tools, or Floyd's moonwalk to the excavated monolith, or Bowman's slow discovery of Hal's treachery. Like Kubrick, Ballard simultaneously evokes tension and wonder with *The Black Stallion*, although never with the thematic reach or artistic pretension of 2001.

The second half of the film, following the rescue of the boy and the horse, is less effective. But more on that in a moment.

The relationship between the boy and the horse is one of codependence. The boy is saved from probable death twice by the stallion. Firstly, after being thrown overboard from the ship, the boy grabs the horse's restraints and is carried to the safety of the island. Secondly, on the island, the horse tramples an aggressive snake.

The boy saves the stallion from probable death twice. He frees the horse from its restraints on the ship and again on the island, where the horse becomes trapped in a rocky outcrop.

The growing trust between the two leads to *The Black Stallion*s best scene, where the boy attempts to feed the horse by hand. If I can anthropomorphize the horse for a moment (and I'm sure readers of [adjective][species] won't mind), I'd argue that this scene shows the greatest acting performance ever by a horse. It is certainly a triumph of animal handling. The horse is clearly nervous as he approaches the boy, pushed and pulled by the competing emotions of anxiety and hunger. His slow approach to the boy's offering is filmed from a distance: a long single shot. The scene is amazing and natural and joyful.

The boy and the horse, doomed to early death alone, combine to thrive on the island. The horse's power provides a blunt instrument against the forces of nature, protecting them both from danger. The boy's resourcefulness helps them survive day-to-day, providing food and shelter. The boy is rightfully fearful of the highly-strung stallion initially but, as the two help one another, respect grows into trust which grows into a tight bond.

The scenes showing the friendship between the boy and the horse are my favourite in the whole film. The two, agents of one another's needs, start to find island life easy. They play: they swim together and the boy (eventually) learns to ride the stallion. These scenes – the stallion's enthusiasm and the boy's laughter – wordlessly depict the joyfulness of their bond.

From a less life-affirming perspective, it's possible to interpret the stallion as an agent of death. In the film's chronology, he seems to be the arbiter of who lives and who dies. Ballard's films often starkly depict death, and this is the case in *The Black Stallion*, which opens with the death of the boy's father and presumably the rest of the ship's passengers and crew.

The boy survives the shipwreck because his obsession with the horse draws him to deck to cut the stallion's restraints. As the horse jumps overboard, the boy is tossed over by the storm, saving him from the boat's subsequent explosion. Later, after the boy frees the horse from his tangle in the island's rocks, the horse saves the boy from the snake. In both cases, the boy's survival is directly associated with – and arguably caused by – his selflessness towards the stallion. The horse, as Death, shows mercy towards those that show mercy to him.

The same events could, of course, be interpreted as a representation of the power of friendship. However I prefer the horse-as-manifestation-of-Death theory, and I point towards the stallion's black coat as evidence.

It might be a stretch to suggest that *The Black Stallion* is an exercise in karmic vengeance, but the horse is shown to be wild, powerful, and dangerous. In an early scene on the boat, the horse is shown fighting against his handlers as they corral him into his stall. The boy is fascinated by the stallion's power and becomes drawn to him, firstly by supplying illicit sugarcubes, and ultimately cutting him to freedom in the storm.

On the island, the horse is still dangerously flighty. However the boy's obsession means he does not see the horse as a threat, and his persevering kindness is rewarded. Their friendship endures when the boy is eventually rescued: the horse swims out to the boat, convincing the rescuers to bring the horse on board as well.

Back at home, the boy is reunited with his grieving mother, and the movie becomes a different beast. The stallion escapes from their yard; the boy meets possibly the most egregious magical negro in cinematic history (who comes with magical and totally gay horses); the horse is found in the barn of a retired jockey; they enter into a horse race for no obvious reason other than to give the film a convenient, and clichd, climax.

The retired jockey is played by Mickey Rooney, who is most famous for hamming it up as a cherub-faced child actor in the 1920s and 30s. His brand of ham has aged poorly, and his scenes in the *The Black Stallion* are the worst of the film. (Kelly Reno, as the boy, comfortably out-acts one of the most celebrated child actors of all time.) While researching this article, I was shocked to learn that Rooney was nominated for an Academy Award for *The Black Stallion*. It must have been a sympathy vote. He did not win.

For all the lameness of the second half of The Black Stallions plot, it is still a beautiful film. The small town in which the boy lives is a perfect slice of rural America. And there is a racetrack scene – a reporter is invited to see the stallion go through his paces – set in a night-time cloudburst that stands alongside the best moments of the film.

In this way, the cinematography of *The Black Stallion* is comparable to the craptactular films of Michael Bay (*Bad Boys*, *Pearl Harbour*, *Transformers*). Bay's films may be irredeemable nonsense, but they are beautifully shot. A Bay film, randomly paused, will often be composed and striking. (It's a pity Bay and his team don't put as much effort into the plot, direction, continuity, or assessment of his audience's intelligence.) *The Black Stallion*, even in it's lowest Rooney-filled moments, is always pretty.

The climactic race scene of *The Black Stallion* is almost Bay-worthy in its preposterousness. However the horseback scenes, shot largely in close range around the boy and the horse, are vivid and moving in their depiction of the stallion's speed and power. A similar technique is used in *The Club*, a 1980 film that follows an Australian Rules team. By filming close to the players and bringing their footfalls to the front of the sound mix, the viewer gets a visceral sense of the footballer (or horse) testing himself to his thoroughbred limits. These scenes, in *The Black Stallion* and in *The Club*, share the athlete's perspective with the viewer like no other.

Notably, and laudably, *The Black Stallion* is not a coming-of-age story. The boy is shown to be self-reliant from the beginning of the film but is very much a child throughout. His journey, starting with the death of his father and ending in a horse race, is defined by his relationship with the horse.

Both boy and horse are juvenile. They complement one another and help one another survive, thrive, and succeed. The boy is creative and the horse is powerful: they are, each, half a man. Together they are a match for the world.

The Black Stallion, then, is a celebration of childhood. One day the boy will grow and become strong and powerful himself, and he will no longer need his other half, the horse. However this is not the subject of the film. In *The Black Stallion*, both boy and horse are free to enjoy and explore their childhood, through their friendship.

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This is the first of four posts on the films of Carroll Ballard. The other three articles will come irregularly, as I write them. All four movies are great. Choose your species and join us:

- *The Black Stallion* (horse)

- *Never Cry Wolf* (wolf): coming soon

- *Fly Away Home* (goose): coming soon

- *Duma* (cheetah): coming soon

1.4   How Being a Furry Saved Me Forty Grand

Tonight I test-drove a $40,000 pickup truck. Don't get me wrongI never had the slightest intention of buying the thing. As I made sure the salesman knew before I ever climbed in and turned the key, I was actually maybe, possibly interested in a baseline truck that costs about half that. My current plain-jane 44 is seventeen years old and has nearly 100,000 miles on it, you see, and the auto manufacturer I work for is currently offering large rebates to the general public and even larger ones to their employees to move the things more quickly, which sparked my interest. But the dealership had nothing but top-end super-fancy (read that "high margin, high profit") stuff on their lot, so if I wanted to take a test drive it was a $40,000 truck or nothing.

The trip around the test loop was routine, including the salesman establishing who I worked for and thereby learning how much he might be able to bleed me for. I told him, of courseit's not polite not to. So when we returned to the dealership I was treated to the predictable chorus-greeting from the rest of the otherwise-unoccupied sales staff. "Oh, isn't that a gorgeous truck?" "I've never seen such a wonderful shade of blue!" "I hear (insert local celebrity's name here) drives one just like that!"

At this point of course I sighed, explained that I was still doing research, and left a terribly disappointed group of middle-aged men behind me. But in much the same way that I'm certain the salesmen, being salesmen, are still reassuring each other that I'll be back even as I type this, as a writer I find myself analyzing both their and my behavior over and over again.

(Please, give me a little more time. This article will become relevant to furry before it's over, I promise!)

The salesmen were doing their best to apply social pressure to me, to make it clear that buying a $40,000 truck is a behavior smiled upon by society and sure to make me more popular and celebrity-like. They flattered its new-for-2013 colorI'm sure they could care less, if forced to be honestand extolled the virtues of a product they knew for fact was a far more expensive vehicle than I really wanted or needed. Some of themthe sales manager and my own salesmanstood to profit financially if I succumbed to the pressure. But most of those doing the cajoling would gain nothing more than a smile of approval from their boss and atta-boys from their coworkers if I'd bought the silly thing.

Sadly, I'm no longer either much saddened or shocked when people treat each other as mere cash cows while conducting business. Greed explains much, and the social status associated with "success" most of the rest. What I can't get over is that simpleminded, transparent tactics like this continue to work and work and work, not just year after year but century after century. I mean...It wasn't just obvious to me what was going on, it was sickeningly obvious. Yet the staff wouldn't

continue to behave in such a manner if it didn't sell $40,000 trucks, and as further evidence I'm forced to acknowledge that an awful lot of my co-workers do in fact park very similar vehicles right alongside my far-cheaper one every day of the week even though they can't afford them any more than I can. In fact, they often buy them from that specific dealer and tell me afterwards what a nice bunch of guys they are!

People are so stupid, I muttered sadly to myself as I drove away from the dealership in my seventeen-year-old, still perfectly serviceable truck that not one but many salesmen have done their level best to part me from. So primitive and easily led. Then, strictly as a mental exercise, I listed those friends of mine who I reckoned might see through the sales pitch as easily as I did.

Almost every one of them was a furry, I realized with a bit of a shock.

And that's the realization that led me to pen this column. I've long contended that the furry fandom (along with the SF fandom and some others) really is different from the bulk of society in some basic, fundamental ways. Part of it is clearly intelligencestatistically speaking I believe we're well offset towards the high end of the curveand one aspect of seeing through traps like the one at the pickup dealer is indeed intelligence. Another, I would contend, is imagination. In order to see the hidden poison behind all the happy-faced affirmation, one must first be able to imagine the possibility that such nastiness actually exists.

I believe, however, that another factor counts for more than either of these: our sense of "outsidership". The application of social pressure is an ineffective lever at best when applied to a dedicated non-conformist, and is often actively counter-productive. But "normal" people are different. From the outside looking in, at least, their need to "fit in" appears to be one of the most powerful forces if not the most powerful force in the lives of most non-fen. Not only does the vast bulk of the population share precisely the same short list of "acceptable" interests and hobbies with each other, they often grow acutely uncomfortable at so much as the idea of, say, owning an unusual species of pet or driving a car that looks substantially different than everyone else's in an unapproved way. "Why would anyone want one of those?" they ask. "No one else has one." And at that point the discussion is pretty much overno matter how many advantages you cite, they shake their heads and grow increasingly uncomfortable at being confronted with the horror of Being Different or thinking about a New Idea. My own father, for example, was utterly bewildered for years by the fact that I write books about half-human animals. Or at least he was until the recent network series based loosely on Grimm's Fairly Tales started, which features a lot of anthro characters. "Oh!" he said after it began to air. "I guess it's okay after all, if it's on TV." That's an exact, word-for-word quote. And while I love my Dad very much, it explains a lot about many things. Including how so many people can so easily end up behind the wheels of $40,000 trucks they don't even remotely need. Because those are on TV too, you see. So it must be okay.

Sure, there are furs among us who are "easy marks" for skilled salespeople. But they don't

make up nearly as a high a percentage of our population as in the general public, I don't think. Why? Because not only are we more intelligent and creative than the general population, we also dance to an entirely different drummer. We embrace the new and different while regarding the conventional with at best distrust. Many if not most of us spend much of our free time at conventions (where we happily wear things most people would rather die than be caught in), looking at furry web pages (where we smile at images that most ordinary folks would find confusing or possibly even repulsive) and chatting online with people that Joe Average Truck Salesman would never, ever willingly admit to spending time with.

And that, I think, is the answer to the question of why I instantly thought of furs as likely being able to see through the little sales-charade I was subjected to tonight. At core we furs don't care what our non-furry peers think, or at least not nearly so much as everyone else does. It's more a pragmatic sort of caring, in other words, as apposed to the vital life-or-death emotional lifeline that social approval seems to constitute for everyone else. This makes us a lot tougher to manipulate; throwing the conventional levers gets you nowhere or worse. So when the sales staff performed their little number I laughed inside instead of reflexively getting out my checkbook in the hope of making myself more like everyone else in my community. Indeed, their actions made me less likely to ever buy anything from them, ever.

I'm not certain, mind you. So don't hold me to this. But I suspect that this is the first time ever that being a fur has actually saved me money. . .

1.5   Cons & PCD: You Can't Go Home Again

Chicago's Midwest FurFest took place last weekend. It's our second-biggest convention (larger than California's Further Confusion, smaller than Pittsburg's Anthrocon), with around 3200 attendees in 2012. I've never been to Midwest FurFest but many of my friends have, and by all accounts it's one of the best-organized and most enjoyable conventions.

Last weekend my Twitter feed was filled with those enjoying the convention, easily identifiable by the #mwff hashtag. From many miles away, I vicariously observed a fursuit parade, mutual friends meeting for the first time, a hotel evacuation, and any number of social antics.

Searching for all those on Twitter using #mwff, I watched many furries – largely strangers – explore the convention. I saw expressions of furriness, geekiness, drunkenness, flirtatiousness, and happiness. It was like peering into an alternate reality, one filled with good-natured animal people.

Furry conventions have a culture of their own. The culture is especially strong within those conventions that are able to monopolize an entire hotel or convention centre. When you pull into the carpark or walk through the front doors of such a convention, you enter a different world. It's a lot like visiting a foreign country.

Arriving at a furry convention can be disorienting. There is a lot of information to assimilate: a different culture, an unfamiliar geography, and new rules. (Where do I check in? Do I need to wear my badge? How do I get to my room? Are my friends here?) It takes some time to adjust to these surroundings, which might be as little as a few minutes (for a seasoned convention-goer) or many hours (for the unsuspecting newbie).

This feeling of disorientation also occurs when you arrive in a foreign country: it's known as information overload. The human brain does a great job of identifying important signals – human faces, voices, road signs – amongst the noise of the world. When walking into a new environment, such as a furry convention, it's difficult to determine what is relevant – and so our brain tries to manage more information. The extra demand on our unconscious brain comes at the cost of conscious brain power, reducing our ability to make decisions or think logically.

Information overload can make us feel disconnected from our surroundings. We become less mindful, and we may feel like we are observing ourselves from a distance. This disconnection combined with reduced cognisance creates confusion. This is why furries tend to aimlessly mill around the front entrance on opening day, and why many retailers think a 'greeter' provides a positive focus for a new customer who might otherwise be hesitant.

We, hopefully, adjust fairly quickly. In a particularly unfamiliar environment – perhaps your first visit to a furry convention or your first time in a new country – this adjustment can be a slow

process. The safety of a hotel room can often be a relief, and courage can be required to open the door and try again.

Once we adjust to the new environment, we tend to accept otherwise novel experiences as a 'new normal'. At a convention, the new culture is a mix of the exotic and the familiar.

A furry convention is neither high-culture nor low-culture, although there are elements of both. Avant-garde art sits next to pornography; philosophical discussions compete for time with drinking games; ruminations on sexual politics give way to lists of the sexiest football team mascots. The tone is not exactly lowbrow, but it's not exactly transcendent either.

More tangibly: furry friendships tend to be quite tactile, so there is a lot of interpersonal physical contact, most obviously when fursuiters are around. Friendly (platonic) physical contact at a furry convention might, outside of the convention doors, be perceived as sexual. The physical closeness seen at conventions seems to be tied into a kind of physical exuberance as well, and it's easy to guess that this is because touching and being touched makes us happy.

There is also a kind of collective delusion at furry conventions, where we tend to treat each other as if we were really our animal-person avatar. Our conbadges supply the picture and name of our alter-ego, and we tend to accept these as true. There is even a tendency for convention-goers to organize by species, and there are many versions of a [species]-only room party. It's tempting to regard this as trivial, but I think this reinforcement of our furry identity helps us relax the masks that hide our furriness in day-to-day life.

Finally, the outward traits of furries as a collective are on display, for good or for bad. We are very male-dominated (about 80%) and we are largely non-heterosexual (about 65%). We're also techy, fussy, sexy, obstinate, poorly dressed, and unathletic.

This all requires adjustment, and it's not always conducive to relaxation and enjoyment.

The cultural differences are not the only challenge. Conventions are, fundamentally, a social environment. It's important to either have plenty of friends or have the opportunity to meet new people (perhaps by attending a [species]-only room party). Without a large social group, a convention can be a very lonely place. Much like a visit to a foreign country, if you can't engage with the local culture on some level, your only other option is to retreat to your hotel room. And when that door closes, you find yourself wondering why on earth you came here in the first place. It's not nice to feel out of place in a situation you've spent a lot of time and money to put yourself in.

For those that thrive in the convention environment, it can provide an immersive counterpoint to the real world. The convention culture is one in which we can relax and feel liberated from stifling social norms. Like an overseas holiday, we can temporarily disregard our responsibilities and failures in the real world. However, when the convention is over, we must cross the border and readjust. This can be disorienting, a phenomenon known among travellers as 're-entry shock'.

The real world can feel unfamiliar when we return. Compared to a furry convention, the culture

can feel restrictive and faintly ludicrous. We may find ourselves feeling slightly disconnected as we leave, just as we did on arrival.

The phrase *you can't go home again* refers to the feeling experienced by someone from a country town, who returns home after living in a city for a while. The person who grew up in the country town is different from the person who returns: the reality of rural life jars with the rose-tinted glow of nostalgia.

If we find comfort in the culture of a furry convention – the tactile friendships, the connection with our furry self, the acceptance, tolerance, exuberance – we might be unwilling to readily reintegrate into the real world. We may feel some resentment toward society's norms, even though we had accepted these before the furry convention. It can take time to overcome post-con depression. We have changed. You can't go home again.

Chapter 2

December

2.1   The Second Wave of Furry

Furry is an evolving phenomenon. This article is an attempt to capture where our community is now, and how we got here.

Furry's First Wave, its origin and consolidation as a unique phenomenon, lasted up until the turn of the century. Furry is currently in its Second Wave, a fast-growing adolescence.

The First Wave of furry is neatly captured in Retrospective: An Illustrated Chronology of Furry Fandom, hosted on Flayrah[1].

The First Wave defined the furry community. Furry began as an offshoot of sci-fi fandom and almost immediately become notable for production of original anthropomorphic content. Furry had less of a focus toward pre-existing art than sci-fi fandom, and in this way furry started to transcend the usual boundaries of a fandom. Over time, furries started to explore the idea of "being" a furry, and a struggle developed between those who considered furry a part of their personal identity, and those who saw furry as a fandom. Furries roughly spilt into these two groups: so-called 'lifestylers' and 'fans'.

Culture wars between the lifestylers and the fans defined the First Wave. The lifestylers openly incorporated sexuality into their identity. The fans were dismayed by the permissiveness shown towards extremes of behaviour, particularly where sex was involved. The furry fans put a premium on quality and family-friendliness, creating Yerf; the furry lifestylers put a premium on acceptance and open sexuality, creating VCL.

The fundamental conflict was simple. For the fans, furry was something you enjoy. For the lifestylers, furry was something you are.

The lifestylers won the culture wars and, in the Second Wave, have become the furry mainstream. There are still furry 'fans' however they have typically been around since the First Wave. Furry is a broad church and fans are not excluded: it's simply that new furries tend to take up an animal-person identity with a species and a new name by default.

Furry is still maturing. Second Wave furries are continuing to explore the idea of furry identity, and also starting to consider the community's culture and values.

(A note on terminology: I like 'community' as a description of our collective although 'fandom' is probably more common, and is used by other writers on this site. I'd argue that 'fandom' is deprecated because, while there are many fans within furry – anime, MLP, Redwall, etc – we are collectively not fans of anything in particular. This is where furry deviates from fandom: we created and propagate a furry universe, a virtual reality of animal-people that exists parallel to the real world.)

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[1]http://www.flayrah.com/4117/retrospective-illustrated-chronology-furry-fandom-1966-1996

Early expressions of Second Wave furry included some conventions (notably ConFurence, which received a lot of criticism for being overtly sexual) and FurryMUCK. In these spaces, furries presented as if they were their animal-person avatar, a furry cultural norm that is now widely accepted. Most furry spaces are Second Wave although this is not always the case: arguably of the two Australian furry conventions, MiDFur (with occasional non-furry guests) is First Wave, whereas the newer Furry Down Under (with a focus on socializing and fursuiting) is Second Wave.

The maturation of furry is reflected in media coverage. During the First Wave, those willing to publicly discuss furry were often on the fringes of the group, and were largely selected to reinforce the freakshow element. Serious attempts to understand furry, such as a 2001 Vanity Fair article, were largely hijacked by furries who were unwilling or unable to act in a socially appropriate fashion. As I have said before here on [a][s], the most visible members of a minority are rarely the best ambassadors. The result was cringeworthy, and furries ran a mile from the image portrayed in the media.

This is no longer the case. Second Wave furries are collectively comfortable with the idea of furry as an identity. Media outlets, regardless of whether they have honourable intentions, are presented with a community that knows how to present itself. Coverage often tends to focus on the more unusual aspects of furry, or even the range of sexualities on display, but the overall vibe is usually one of disinterested acceptance. The visibility and city-wide acceptance of Anthrocon during its annual residency in Pittsburgh is a good example.

I saw Anthrocon's Sam Conway speak a few years ago, and he went out of his way to talk about furries who held respectable positions in the real world. He mentioned furry aeronautical engineers, medical doctors, and the like. It was a speech from someone who was trying to convince himself – and his audience – that the First Wave furry stereotypes no longer apply. He was, like Ophelia, protesting too much, as if he could will such a situation into being. They were the words of someone who had experienced the worst of the First Wave furry culture first-hand, where furry's reputation was repeatedly tarnished in the media by extreme elements of the group.

Conway's concerns are reasonable but out-of-date. Nowadays, the idea that furries might be innately unemployable is all but nonsensical.

However the perceptions of the furry group in the First Wave suffered from the actions of a visible minority. Furries distanced themselves from such behaviour, insisting that real furries are people who simply, "have an appreciation for anthropomorphic characters".

Pre-emptively defensive sentiments like Conway's persist on Wikipedia. There are hardworking wiki-guardians who maintain furry's entry, the highest-profile source of information for someone unfamiliar with the community. It opens with:

> The furry fandom is a subculture interested in fictional anthropomorphic animal characters with human personalities and characteristics.

The article provides an alternative definition of furry for "furry lifestylers", quoting a line from Usenet that is about 20 years old:

> . . . a person with an important emotional/spiritual connection with an animal or animals, real, fictional or symbolic.

Wikipedia's portrayal of furry, like Conway's speech, is firmly First Wave. We no longer need to act so defensively: our collective image is no longer shaped by a few outliers.

Fandom, as opposed to furry, is still largely perceived as a collection of social rejects. In many cases it's reasonably applicable: if you are obsessed with Hamtaro (say), it's likely that you are either very young or you have a very limited relationship with the wider world. The stereotype of the narrow-minded geek, that of Comic Book Guy or the stock action-figure-collecting sitcom character, is one of fandom. Furries are still pretty geeky and fandom-oriented – 61% of us describe ourselves as 'a fan of science fiction' (Ref Furry Survey) – but it's no longer the driving force of our community.

(I don't want to suggest that fandom geeks are any better or worse than furries. I'm merely trying to describe the progression from furry's First Wave and its fandom origins, to today's Second Wave. I appreciate that my embrace of fandom stereotypes is reductive and possibly a little insulting. I mean to say that fans will be over-represented by Comic Book Guy, not that all fans are like that.)

Furry media is largely Second Wave. Our social sites – Fur Affinity, Inkbunny, Sofurry – are Second Wave almost by definition, as furries socialize nearly exclusively as animal-people. Meta furry sites, like Flayrah and [adjective][species], who look at furry with a critical eye, are also Second Wave. There are still echoes of the First Wave culture wars however these are largely marginalized to 'below the line' forums, comment threads, and the juvenalia of 4Chan and Encyclopaedia Dramatica.

One of furry's greatest features is that it is decentralized. We do not have a universally-respected figurehead or a formal code of conduct. Our culture and our community are fluid. Our most useful tools are those which allow furries to come together as a loose collective: conventions, social media, art depositories.

As we grow – and we are growing worldwide, fast – our culture is consolidating. New furries learn to abide by the unwritten rules of the pre-existing furry culture. This maturation is the furry Second Wave. Keep your whiskers erect and your ears perked for signs of the next step forward.

2.2   Informal Networks

Being furry can help your employment prospects. The connectedness of furries means that we are exposed to new people and new opportunities. This is true for any social network but it's especially true for the furry world.

The business world is not a level playing field. Ideally, people would be employed and promoted based on competence, but this is not always the case. Some people have unfair advantages: the boss's son; the alum from an elite university; the captain of the football team. Other people may unfairly suffer, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or anyone perceived to 'not fit in'.

Unfair advantages are often examples of the adage "it's not what you know, it's who you know". In the management consulting world, these are known as informal networks.

Famously effective informal networks include Skull & Bones, Yale University's secret undergraduate society, with members including George H.W. and George W. Bush, and 2004 Democratic challenger John Kerry among many others. While the members of Skull & Bones are an intelligent group, undoubtedly many of their number have been helped by having friends in high places.

The value of informal networks can also be seen in those people who know – through friends or family – a professional or tradesman. Legal queries are easy if you can call a lawyer; medical opinions are easy to find if you live with a doctor; computer problems are easy to solve if you're related to a furry.

Companies will usually develop a structure that is intended to define the passage of communication: guidance flows from the CEO down to the workers, and results are reported up the chain. Many companies have a formal organization chart to depict this, along with role descriptions for each of the employees to clearly show appropriate lines of communication. However these structures are only part of the story – in reality, workers tend to communicate with their friends, or peers, or whoever happens to be sitting near them.

Management consultants try to model these informal networks of communication to see how they affect the business (see here for an introduction). Some communication can be beneficial to the company; some can be harmful. Thanks to this research, it's also possible to understand how informal networks can help (or hinder) an employee.

In management-consultancy jargon, it's good to be a "mobile" employee. A mobile employee is one who is more likely to be promoted within the company, or more likely to leave for a better job. These opportunities means that mobile employees are less likely to be stuck, and likely to earn more money.

From a manager's perspective, mobile employees are difficult. They tend to command higher salaries but are often critical to the function of the company. If a manager loses a mobile employee, it can take two or more people to adequately fill the role.

Furries are often mobile employees, for three reasons:

1. The furry world provides a broad range of connections. A typical furry group is more heterogeneous then a typical peer group. Accordingly, a furry is more likely to know people in different roles within his industry: perhaps technical, low-level support, management, the self-employed, service providers. Such connections can give access to information that might otherwise be difficult (or impossible) to attain.

   For example: an engineer furry might learn from a friend that a desirable job will soon become available.

2. The furry world has a lot of people working in similar industries, particularly white-collar technical roles. The sheer number of potential connections increase the likelihood that a fur will learn useful new information that is not available to her colleagues.

   For example: a programmer furry might be able to cast for opinions of an alternative development environment without having to spend time and effort performing research.

3. There is implied trust between furries. (This is a feature of our community I touched upon in my article titled The Furry Accommodation Network.) This means that furries are more likely to communicate freely and with respect, so the connections tend to be high quality as well as numerous.

   For example: a furry in a management position looking for a new employee may broadcast the opportunity in furry networks, because the implied trust makes hiring a furry a less risky (and more fun) proposition.

These three reason are those that management consultants use to identity mobile employees. I think that there is another, overlooked, reason that can increase someone's exposure to new opportunities: the ability to move interstate or overseas for a new role.

A long-distance move is risky. The risk, at least from an employer's point of view, is that the newly moved employee (and family) may not 'settle' in the new environment. Potential employers will usually offer a bonus to someone moving into a new area, often dressed up as "relocation expenses". This bonus is designed to retain a new employee who might be otherwise unhappy in their new location, hoping that the money will translate to loyalty.

Relocated employees often struggle because they have lost their social life. This is especially common when the new employee comes with a Significant Other, who doesn't gain the social

benefits of the new workplace. For furries, this is an easily surmountable problem: there are furry groups to be found everywhere. (And a lot of our social world is online anyway.)

Research also shows that there is no correlation between the position of someone within a network and their personality (ref). Furries who are introspective and shy are just as likely to be mobile and/or high-value to a company. The loudest people often receive the most attention in an office environment, however these people tend to foster low-quality connections. The quieter introverts tend to forge more valuable friendships.

Finally, online social networks provide a special challenge for employers. There is little research on the effect of such networks owing to their relative newness (the world of research moves slowly), however early results suggest that networks like Facebook provide advantages to employees at the cost of the company. For this reason, many companies decide to block or limit social networking sites even though this is an unpopular decision. This is especially true in industries with few 'mobile' employees: companies are concerned about the cost of unwittingly exposing their employees to better opportunities.

These opinions should be taken with a grain of salt. Most of the conclusions on the effect of online social networks are drawn from a landmark 2009 study on Microsoft's employees (link). The social networks investigated, from most common to least common, were LinkedIn, Facebook, Live Spaces, MySpace, Orkut, and Friendster. Twitter was mentioned in a footnote (no word on Fur Affinity). Clearly results drawn from this study are out of date, a conclusion reinforced by tone of the discussion (*"MySpace remains the choice of geeks"*).

One final interesting, if largely irrelevant, point: furry networks also resemble dark networks, as understood in the context of terrorism and terrorist cells. In dark networks, the source of power is obfuscated. It's comparable to furries on Twitter, in that many accounts are private so it can be difficult to follow the progression of an idea. Social networking analysis was used to guess the location of Saddam Hussein's hideout: furries trying to track down someone on Twitter might (informally) use a similar technique, starting with known acquaintances and looking for a key furry who might provide a direct connection (ref).

The value of these informal networks will be felt differently by different furries. They are most likely to be strong in furry-rich industries, such as tech. They are less likely to be useful in industries with few furries, or in so-called "dead end" blue-collar jobs where mobility may be difficult or impossible.

In extreme cases, some lucky furries will find new jobs and prosper largely through the strength of the informal furry network; others will see no benefit at all. However it's nice to know that it's not just Skull & Bones getting an unfair advantage.

2.3   Of Rabbits and Rayguns

I've been a semi-professional writer for many years now. I published my first short story in about 1999, and since then have written and published about twenty-two or twenty-three vaguely book-length thingies (I tend to write a much higher percentage of novellas than most authors, frequently sold to the public as shorter than standard books) plus I've lost count of how many shorts. While I mostly write furry and furry SF, I also do horror, non-furry SF, essays, fantasy and even good old conventional literary fiction. So I know the publishing industry a little, or at least I think I do.

Over the past year, I've achieved my first real landmark success in the David Birkenhead books, in which a young slavebunny is manumitted and finds success in a future navy despite all the social roadblocks that lie in his way. Each book in the series is titled after the rank that David achieves during the course of the story, from Ship's Boy to Admiral. Currently my publisher and I are ecstatically selling well over a thousand copies a week. So far so good and yay for me, right? Maybe.

As I said, I've been dealing with the publishing industryand through it, in theory at least, the wants and needs of book-buyersfor some time. Over and over again the "big guys" have rejected my stuff even though in my own opinion many of my previous works have been better than the Birkenheads. More often than not I got a rejection letter saying something like "Good workyou're writing at the professional level. But we don't publish talking animal stories." Then they'd add nitpicky comments about my personal style that usually were in direct contradiction to the nitpicks I received the time before. It was obvious that the "talking animals" were the real problem, especially for my serious furry SF stuff, even though the science involved wasn't just clearly justified in the work in question but was often the root of the theme and the driver of the plot. Without the talking animals, which in my case were usually rabbits, the book was nothing. And because my own best ideas most often are equally rooted in furry imagery, well It was clear that something would have to give. I could either compromise my art to meet the unspoken "no furries allowed" rule at the big publishing houseswhich their other comments made clear was what they really wantedor I could be true to my muse and accept that I'd never do business with the mainstream book industry.

So I set out to beat the big publishers at their own game and sell furry fiction despite everything the closed-minded bastards could do to stop me. At this point I had written three multi-book series that I truly believed were of professional quality and could sell well if given the chance. (One of these three was the Birkenheads.) I sent one each to three small publishers (two of them furry-fandom based) and commenced hostilities against the mainstream. As of today, I can almost

claim victory. The Birkenheads, as mentioned above, are currently selling at a rate well in excess of a thousand a week and, as I type this, all seven volumes are in the Amazon Kindle Science Fiction Top 100. Sure enough the other two series are now selling well too, though not at the same blistering rate. I can claim complete vindication and declare victory.

Almost.

There's still one major thing wrong, which I didn't anticipate and perhaps should've. While most of the reviews of the Birkenhead books are embarrassingly positive, a very significant minority of readers apparently are driven to the point of rending their clothing and gnashing their teeth when, about five pages or so into Ship's Boy, they discover (having failed to read the book's "blurb", which would've warned them) that they've been reading a story told from the viewpoint of an uplifted rabbit (capital-R Rabbit, in the nomenclature of the series). Something about this is apparently hideously repulsive to them at the core identity level, to the point that in their reviews they do things like claim my parents must've been alcoholics. (No, I didn't make that one up.) Others state that this is proof that I know nothing of scienceapparently ray guns and FTL travel are far more "scientific" than genetic engineering and species uplift. Some go so far as to call the work well-written, but say it's "impossible" for them to get into the character. One even suggested it'd be a good book if the protagonist had been an alien instead.

It's easier to relate to a complete alien than a Rabbit?

Don't get me wrong here. At this point I can gaze serenely upon such reviews and laugh all the way to the bank. I'm being well compensated for acting as a public target, and by far the majority of the comments are supportive and positive. I'm not after sympathy here. Rather, I'm seeking to understand something.

Why exactly is it that some readers react so strongly, even violently, to the idea of a serious story being told from the viewpoint of a Rabbit?

Usually in these columns I try to offer some sort of insightpossible answers to the questions I raise. This time, however, I find myself pretty much at a loss. All long- time furs recall an era when our fandom was seen as something sick and repulsive, and indeed this period may well not yet be over. For when I read the public Amazon reviews on Ship's Boy and to a lesser extent the later volumes of the series, I see the public's reaction to furry in microcosm. Mostly these reviews reflect open- minded support and people who like to have fun, yes. And bless them for it! But I also see a large minority who for reasons I literally cannot imagine instantly become totally unhinged at the idea of seeing the world through anthropomorphic eyes. If you read their comments, it's like they felt the need to ritually purify themselves by expressing immoderate outrage and indignation after exposure to such an unclean influence. Theirs is an attitude that cannot be reasoned withit goes far deeper than that. The subject fascinates me; I think there's real knowledge to be gained about basic human nature if a way can be found to research the matter systematically.

And I hope this research someday is indeed actually done. Because only now, after declaring war on the mainstream publishers and then beating them in terms of sales do I realize that the real battle is only beginning. The one the publishers knew about all along, and were rejecting me over. And why shouldn't they? After all, it's not their fight. Why risk having their products plastered with negative reviews that resonate with John Q. Public despite their inherent irrationality?

The real fight, I've learned from all this, is the one that will someday allow everyone everywhere to understand that it's okay to experience the universe through whatever set of eyes they choose. Everything else is merely a subset of this larger battle, and it'll be more a matter of freeing people from themselves than anything else. Combat is only just beginning in earnest, and I'm not a young man anymore. I probably won't live to see the end of it. But by golly I mean to get my licks in regardless!

2.4   No, You Don't Have Asperger's

There are a lot of furries who have Asperger's disorder, or at least a lot who think they have Asperger's disorder. As of May 2013, none of them will have it: it's being deleted from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It's in DSM-IV; it will not be in DSM-5. (Roman numerals are out too, apparently.)

Along with three other conditionsautistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and 'pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified'Asperger's is being lumped into Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD. ASD reflects our understanding of autism as a universal aspect of personality rather than a specific condition. People with Asperger's will be recategorized as having mild ASD, or as having no disorder at all.

This is very good news for people with Asperger's, especially those with mild symptoms. (Anyone self-diagnosed with Asperger's is highly unlikely to have ASD, for reasons I'll explain later in this article.)

Autistic people fail to read social cues, and this leads to communication issues and inappropriate behaviour. In general, someone is classified as having ASD (as per DSM-5) if this condition is bad enough to be disabling.

Everyone, to some extent, has symptoms of autism: it's a natural outcome of how the brain works. Our species has evolved to have certain mental traits that support our social nature: we excel at facial recognition (to the extent that we might see faces in a grilled cheese sandwich, or in sand dunes on Mars); we are more empathetic towards fellow humans than towards other animals; we unconsciously negotiate sexual interest. Autistic people have poor social skills because these parts of brains are innately limiteda genetic throwback to a pre-evolved brain.

Autism is not an on/off condition, like having a broken leg. Some people have brains that are strongly socially-wired, perhaps actors or salesmen, others are less socially-wired and tend to be more logically minded, perhaps programmers or engineers. But everyone feels socially awkward, or out of place, or humiliated, from time to time.

Compared to society at large, furries are collectively further along the autistic spectrum. Symptoms of this might include our flair for technical work, such as IT and the sciences, and perhaps in our enjoyment of fursuits, which create a 'deindividualized' social environment.

I see two causes that place furries further along the autistic spectrum:

Our demographics: we are young and overwhelmingly male. Put simply, men typically take longer than women to socially mature. People with autistic traits might be attracted to furry: Anyone who struggles to read social cues will feel disconnected from society, especially if they are

going through puberty. People who are non-heteronormative or genderqueer – and this somewhere around 70% of furries (ref, ref) – are more likely to feel alienated.

For young people who feel disconnected, it may be easier to identify with an anthropomorphic animal (as seen on TV or other media) than with other human beings. Growing up, furries may internalize this identification to the point that they start to see themselves as more like the animal-person and less human. This will be important to sexual development and may become a touchstone through puberty: the animal-person becomes an alter-ego that can safely experiment with new personality traits through introspection and roleplayfor example, alternative sexual or gender identities.

(I've explored the value of furry roleplay as an avenue to maturation previously, Growing Up.)

It's plausible that a sense of alienation when growing up is a strong contributor to our identity as furries. It helps that the concept of furry identity is open to interpretation, which means that we are free to explore personally useful aspects while discarding others. It also helps that the furry community is social and welcoming, filled with people with a similar internal world. Serendipitously, for many people, the social nature of the furry community provides a solution to the alienation that drew them to furry in the first place.

If the furry identity stems from this feeling of alienation, this offers an explanation for our unusual demographics:

- Furry is largely male: men, on average, are less socially developed when they reach puberty.

- Furry is geeky: geeks, largely people with sharp logical minds, are often slower to develop socially.

- Furry is largely non-heterosexual: if you are sexually queer (or genderqueer), your social development can be more difficult.

In these three examples, furries may come to identify as an animal person as a way of unconsciously abnegating personal responsibility for social failure. It also explains why some furries might self-diagnose a social disorder: Asperger's.

It's common for people with Asperger's disorder to characterize themselves as feeling like a non-human, like an alien tourist in a strange society. It's easy to see why a young furry, who feels disconnected from the world and identifies as an animal-person, would find this compelling. Asperger's disorder is also fairly high-profile because it's relatablemild autism is comparable to the less permanent condition of being a teenagerand also because of Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, a novel with an apparently autistic narrator. The narrator, Christopher, is an easy character for any young adult to relate to in the Holden Caulfield sense: he's an outsider, confounded by his constant failure to act according to society's fluid and unsaid

rules. It's an engaging read (although it flags badly in the second half as Haddon gamely tries to narrate action through Christopher's limited perception of the world).

Anyone identifying with Christopher from The Curious Incident is almost definitely not autistic. To identify is to demonstrate empathy, the very trait that Christopherand anyone with Asperger's/ASDlacks. The same logic can be applied more broadly: if you think you have autism, you almost certainly don't.

Autistic people are often unable to see themselves as part of society. Ironically, anyone who thinks that they don't fit in is demonstrating that they fit in well enough to be aware of society's norms. A feeling of alienation doesn't imply alienation. It's usually the opposite: a feeling of alienation implies that you are maturing and learning to assimilate.

This is the difference between being autistic and being a teenager: autistic people do not mature to the point that they can fully function within society. It's also worth considering that maturation continues until we are about 30 years old, and that the skills that help us feel part of societyempathetic skillsare the slowest to develop (ref).

So self-diagnosis of autistic disorders is usually wrong. It's also potentially damaging.

Labels are important things. If you believe you have Asperger's disorder, this means that you believe you will always struggle in many social situations. You believe that you cannot mature and improve beyond a certain point, because you believe you are innately limited. If you are younger than 30 (or so), this means that you are undermining your own ability to mature and develop these skills. In sociological and psychological circles this is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy, defined as 'a false definition of a situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come true' (ref).

The deletion of Asperger's from DSM-5 means that doctors can no longer diagnose autistic disorders without evidence of symptoms in early childhood (ref). It's easy to misdiagnose autism in an older child who is slow to socially mature. Psychologists have been long aware of the danger of such labels: a false diagnosis of Asperger's can harm someone who would otherwise mature a little later (possibly as a well-adjusted furry).

It's not just Asperger's. Among psychologists, there is growing awareness of the danger of labels. For example, a 1997 meta-study on child sex abuse concluded that many people have had positive sexual experiences when a child: consider the trope of the 14 year old boy who has sex with the babysitter. The study recommended that not all children be labelled (and treated) as victims of abuse, because doing so could retrospectively harm someone who would otherwise be fine. (The study, unfortunately, was ignored after it was formally condemned in the United "Think of the Children" States Congress, ref.)

Self-diagnosis of Asperger's is common because it's natural for a child, who is slow to develop socially, to define himself as different. All children feel that they are the centre of the universe.

When an intelligent, analytical child looks around, it's clear that the outside world doesn't treat him as anything special. The inconsistency between his internal world and the external world creates conflict and a feeling of disconnection. This child may read about autism and falsely self-diagnose as having Asperger's. He would be much better off if he self-diagnosed as a furry, a label that encourages personal growth, as opposed to the self-limiting label of Asperger's.

How do you tell if you're autistic? Here's what the DSM-5 says:

> People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items.

It's impossible to self-diagnose. If you lack communication skills, you also lack the ability to assess the quality of your communication skills. People with ASD tend to be anosognosic, in that they are unable to perceive their disability (ref).

Your parents, or older siblings, are better placed to judge. They saw you grow up and will have noticed any symptoms in early childhood, which always occur in autistic people (by definition, ref). Otherwise, ask a doctor: they will use a simple written or verbal test to judge whether you have ASD. Everyone has autistic tendencies: it's a question of the level of impairment.

If you have self-diagnosed as having Asperger's, or if you were diagnosed when young, it may be time to reconsider. You may wish to think of yourself as logical and analytical, positive identity traits that allow room for you to learn and grow. Your analytical nature will help you learn new skills including improved empathy, if you apply your mind and approach the problem logically. You might begin by broaching the topic with similarly-minded furries.

2.5   On Giving

Normally, I keep myself a list of articles that I'd like to write for [a][s], and I try to space them out throughout the year so I don't write, say, too many articles about art or conventions in the same time period. Another thing that I've instinctually stayed away from are seasonal posts. It's a little too easy, I think, to get caught up in the [season] spirit and doing so can cheapen the content of the post. The last thing a lot of people really want to read, I think, is some ode to giving spilled out on a blog during the winter holidays.

So, I'm sorry.

The problem I've run into here is that this is one of those cases where inspiration for a specific topic coincided with the holiday season due to a few external events, and now I'm stuck really wanting to write an article for the first time in a long time despite habits saying otherwise. It was a three-pronged attack, really, and so now here I am, writing for the first time in quite a while, looking into furries and giving.

The first event that nudged me toward this topic is a little personal (not that that's gotten in my way in the past). JM was kind enough to help take over most of the writing and much of the administrivia that goes into [a][s] over the last several weeks, and before I get too far into the topic of giving, I'd like to publicly thank him, at the risk of sounding maudlin, for being rather awesome about the whole thing while I get my head on straight.[2] Having someone willing to give the time and energy to help keep things rolling forward in the mean time has been quite helpful, and watching the response to the writings from JM and others has been immensely heartening.

On a less personal note, however, there's been a few things going around on twitter that have been the more recent nudges to get me writing about this. Firr started it, for me, when he posted that, for every retweet he received of this tweet, he would be donating fifty cents to the ASPCA (as some have mentioned, although that sounds like relatively little, Firr has over six thousand followers on twitter, and there's the potential for the numbers to grow quite large). This struck me as a pretty good idea, and so a friend and I both agreed to match his donation after the "retweet-drive" had come to an end on December 25th.[3] We weren't the only ones inspired, either; KalypsoPuppy set up something similar, but with a dollar given to the ASPCA for every retweet of his statement. (Minor edit: another has popped up; BinaryFox donating to Red Cross.) I'd not personally seen a

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[2]Literally; much of the reason for my absence was a motor tic in my neck that makes it hard to look straight ahead. Ha ha.

[3]In the process of writing this article, another person has agreed to match Firr, and two of the matchers mentioned that they are being matched by their employers, meaning that each retweet, instead of being worth $0.50, is worth $3.00, so far. As of the last edit of this post, with 599 retweets, the total donation is nearly $1,800, with KalypsoPuppy and their matcher adding $216 to that.

retweet drive such as either of these before, but it does seem like it has the potential to be successful, especially given the way information propagates through twitter, along branching networks of relationships between individuals.

Another example of smaller-scale charitable works perpetuated through social networks are various benefit auctions, several of them ladder style, that have cropped on FA, The Dealer's Den, and other such sites. A good example of the like is the charity auction to raise money for the Rocky Mountain Feline Rescue, a ladder auction and donation drive that wound up pulling together over $4500 to help fund the shelter for several months. Much of this took place over FurAffinity through journals as well as through several retweet-this style messages sent out by a bunch of individuals on twitter. Similar auctions have been held in the past in order to help out causes both furry and non-furry.

If the spreading tweets on twitter and journals on FA got me thinking about furries and giving, the final straw was researching convention charities that got me thinking about writing. Conventions, of course, often pick a charity or charities to sponsor that year with proceeds from auctions, patron or sponsor memberships, and direct donations, either from individuals or an organization, such as that which runs the convention. Notable this year, however, was Midwest FurFest's total donation of more than $40,500 for their selected charity, Felines & Canines, Inc. (who certainly appreciated the donation). Not only is that number high – very high – but according to the same post (which, I apologize, I can't link to directly; this link will eventually age out), this donation puts the total amount donated to charities by furry conventions since 1997 over a million dollars. That is definitely a lot of money. The number likely originates from this entry on Wikifur, which shows the dramatic increase in funding over the last fifteen years.

I did a bit of exploring of the data for three conventions in this draft of a visualization, on the hunch that the average donation per attendee had gone up as attendance at cons had increased. It's clearly not quite the case: there are good years and there are bad years. However, it is exciting to see that, in general, the amount donated per convention increased each year in pace with or greater than the pace of the increase in attendance. There are a lot of factors that go into charity donations at conventions, it turns out. There is, of course, the charity auction, but also portions of patron or sponsor memberships go toward the charity, as well as direct donations either through collection jars or other means. This, I think, helps explain the variance from year to year visible in some of those charts.

So, is giving a furry thing? Probably not. It's not that we're not charitable, as we obviously are. However, I'm not sure that being a furry necessarily makes one more giving (even if, as I'll explain later, certain things about our subculture encourage it).

Is giving a social thing, however? Almost certainly so. A lot of giving takes place in a social context. Some notable examples, of course, are tithing and zakat. Both take place within the social

context of a religious (or political, in the cases where religion and politics coincide) organization, and both are intended for charitable use. Another example is corporate matching, where a corporation will match an employee's donation, sometimes to a list of approved charities. This encourages the employees to donate within the social context of their workplace. Even the very existence of charities is a social phenomenon, where individuals with a shared will to help change the world for the better in a certain aspect group together in order to form a charitable organization.

There is a lot that goes into the idea of giving and charity beyond even the social ties involved in donating to, or even participating in some sort of act of giving, whether it's cutting a check or retweeting something when it scrolls by on your feed. For one, there have been several studies which have suggested that giving has a positive effect on a person's life and sense of well-being. Additionally, one's identity plays a role in giving; one can identify as a donor, a volunteer, or a giver, helping to add to their sense of self (ref). Of course, beyond donations, one can volunteer directly for a cause, as several members of our subculture do, the suiters most visibly. These two facets, donation and volunteering, can even be played off each other in order to help benefit the cause further – asking individuals how much time they would be willing to give to a cause rather than how much money can encourage them to donate more money in the end, due to the emotional implications of volunteering being added to the financial implications of simply donating (ref).

All of this fits in well within the social context of our subculture. The impetus of giving provided by the context itself, the effect of giving on happiness and well-being, and the emotional and financial obligations involved in giving can all be seen, in some form or another, in the way we as furries give. Whether or not one agrees with the cause itself, the donations to Fernando Decarvalho in order to help keep his business, Fernando's Cafe, open are a prime example of this. The social momentum came from individuals like Kagemushi and 2, while many individuals felt good giving to a businessman to help with his debts from a failing business, and furries managed to raise $21,000 for Fernando's Cafe.

Be it in small doses such as in the retweet campaigns, a bit more in the case of charity auctions, $40,500 from an entire convention, or even helping to run a website for a while, we give do quite a lot, in this fandom. In other words, whether or not giving is necessarily a furry thing, we seem to do quite well at it.

2.6   Blood, Toil, Tears, and Fur

This is a lightly edited reprint of a column from Anthro Magazine #20

I've always admired Winston Churchill, perhaps more than anyone else who ever lived. Somehow he managed to cram not one but a whole succession of lives into the span of one. He rode in the last cavalry charge of the British Army; wrote more books than most full-time authors (winning the Nobel Prize in literature along the way); became arguably the most successful columnist and reporter of his day; was a noted watercolorist; coined terms like 'seaplane' and 'iron curtain'; arguably invented the tank; not only prepared the Royal Navy for World War I but also led it during the early and most crucial parts of that conflict; and sponsored key social legislation that few associate him with today. He was present on Wall Street just after the Crash of 1929, in Cuba during the insurrection against Spain, and personally fought in desperate, bloody actions in India. He remains the only person ever voted an honorary citizen of the United States, by special Act of Congress. Oh, and by the way, he also led Britain during the proudest and toughest period of her history, when she stood alone for freedom against Adolph Hitler and all of occupied Europe. Mustn't forget that part!

He was also without question a furry, long before there was a name for such a thing.

Shocked? So was I, when I first came upon the truth while reading The Last Lion, a biography of the man by William Manchester. Unlike all the other biographies I'd read, this one was up close and personal-more about the man himself than his accomplishments. In it I learned of the troubled, attention-starved youth with a wild and vivid imagination, who couldn't ever quite fit in and all but failed out of school because he couldn't deal with the regimentation of rote learning. I cried with the adolescent who refused to abandon his nurse despite the fact that he was mocked for it by his peers – his parents had cast her off to live on nothing, and young Winston helped her with money from his own allowance and kept in close touch until the day she died. Later, I grew to know the brilliant young man whose keen intellect eventually became apparent to everyone, but whose poor social skills kept him an outcast. And, I have to admit, everything seemed to be fitting a familiar sort of pattern.

But I couldn't quite put a name on it until I ran into his fursuit.

Yes, it's true: Winston Churchill owned a fursuit. More than that, he owned a whole closet full of costumes, though apparently this was his favorite. He wore it quite frequently, it seems, playing and roughhousing with his grandchildren. As difficult as it might be to picture, according to Mr. Manchester Winston Churchill loved to dress up as a gorilla.

I blinked when I read that part, as little bells and whistles began to ring in my mind. Churchill also kept odd hours, sleeping twice a day instead of once, and did his best work late at night. In a

nation noted for its eccentrics, he was an oddball. Winston loved animals deeply – his home was supposed to be a working farm, but he could never bring himself to slaughter any of the livestock and even worried for days once over a sick goldfish. More and more alarms went off...

...until finally I hit the hard, definitive paydirt, the letters between he and his wife.

Here's a quote from Manchester...

> Like other lovers, they invented pet names for each other. Clementine was "Cat", or "Kat", Winston was "Pug", then "Amber Pug", then "Pig". Drawings of these animals decorated the margins of their letters to each other, and at dinner parties Winston would reach across the table, squeeze her hand, and murmur "Dear Cat".

Or, at a later date...

> "We are going to bathe in the lake this evening," he told her in a typical note. "No cats allowed! Your Pug in clover, W." And she would assure him that while he was gone "your lazy Kat sits purring and lapping cream and stroking her kittens."

These were not one-offs, taken out of context. Due to Churchill's odd schedule and frequent travels, he and his beloved Kat didn't see much of each other, and even while living in the same house they wrote each other frequent letters. Practically all of them are full of love – and they're equally full of what we today would recognize in a heartbeat as typical anthropomorphic on-line role-play.

Here's another example, among many. In closing a long letter in which Churchill's political enemies are clawed to pieces, Clementine wrote her husband:

"Good-Bye, my Darling. I love you very much. Your Radical Bristling-" here she drew an indignant cat.

It goes on and on and on in this vein. A modern-day fur, looking at this body of correspondence, cannot help but feel right at home. Indeed, he might even envy the easy and natural way that these two very-much-in-love individuals unselfconsciously communicated using the anthropomorphic symbols and language that clearly meant so much to them. Matters continued in this vein to the very end, as did their love. If any part of Churchill's life can be described as filled with joy, this was probably it.

A lot of people seem to enjoy bashing furs. These same sorts of people seemed to enjoy bashing Churchill as well until he grew into such a historical giant that no one dared any longer. He started out life as an awkward, troubled, sickly and accident-prone youth that no one understood and who seemingly couldn't get ahead. But he grew tall and strong, perhaps taller and stronger than any other man of his time. There's not the slightest doubt in my mind that, were he alive today, we'd find him attending furcons and hanging around in furry chatrooms.

I'd submit that Winston Churchill's furriness, along with the intelligence, creativity and sensitivity that so often accompany it, was an essential component of his colossal strength. Certainly, it was a major part of who he was, and how he saw the world.

Which apparently wasn't, if you're reading this, so very different from the way that you and I see it. *Fly Away Home* (1996) is the third of director Carroll Ballard's four great animal films. I've discussed *The Black Stallion* (1979) in a previous article; *Never Cry Wolf* (1983) and *Duma* (2005) will come later.

Fly Away Home is the story of a tween girl who becomes the de facto mother to a gaggle of young geese. Like Ballard's other three films, it's entertaining, great fun, and – in partnership with cinematographer Caleb Deschanel – a spectacular exploration of the beauty of his animal stars. It's a grown-up movie that can be enjoyed by children.

But is it a furry film? And what makes a film 'furry' anyway?

A quick peek at the Ursa Majors and the regular 'Furry Movie Award Watch' features on Flayrah indicates a strong preference for animated children's films in the vein of *Kung Fu Panda*. That's fair enough: anthropomorphic characters have always featured in children's entertainment, including many of the reference points for the early furry fandom (*Robin Hood*, *The Lion King*). Anthro characters are rare in films intended for adults.

The [adjective][species] chronicler of the international spread of the furry community, Zik, asked for furry movie recommendations recently on Fur Affinity (link). He guessed, correctly, that people would recommend Robin Hood and Fantastic Mr Fox, and little else. So where are the rest of the furry films? Many furries, of course, enjoy those movies that are designed for children, but – as a community – we don't seem to have a go-to oeuvre of grown-up furry movies in the way we do books or TV.

I'd argue that any film with non-human protagonists might be considered furry. Aside from the Carroll Ballard films I'm writing about here, you could include Avatar or even the Alien films in that group. Certainly, both those films will appeal to some furries on a deeper level. *Fly Away Home* does too: even though our geese are not anthropomorphic in any way, they are presented in a way that invokes the close personal bond that some people have with their pets.

The movie starts, as Ballard's films often do, with death. The 13-year-old main character, Amy, is riding in a car with her mother. The only sound is music, a new version of the old folk standard, 10,000 Miles. As it turns out, 10,000 miles is the approximate distance between Amy's parents. She is with her mother just outside of Auckland, her father (and the rest of the film) is in rural Ontario.

Fly Away Home starts in New Zealand because Amy is played by Anna Paquin. Paquin is best known nowadays as Rogue from the X-Men films: in 1995 she was 13 and had just won an Academy Award for her debut film role in The Piano.

Good child actors must be hard to find. Casting Paquin meant that the film needed to be rewritten to explain (excuse?) her New Zealand accent. The choice of 10,000 Miles to accompany the prologue presumably also came after Paquin was cast.

Amy's mother dies in the crash, and Amy flies to join her father in the Canadian countryside. She then discovers some goose eggs abandoned due to land clearing near her new home, and we have ourselves a coming-of-age story, as Amy plays Mother Goose to a gaggle of ludicrously cute goslings.

This all happens in the first few minutes. As a viewer, it's already obvious that this is a film with no filler. Ballard doesn't like to advance his plot through conversation: in interviews he has dismissively referred to spoken exposition as 'yak scenes'.

The film also stands out for having a female lead character. It shouldn't be rare to see a coming-of-age story starring a girl, but sadly it is. This was noted by one of our commenters on my *Fantastic Mr Fox article*, who noted "It is harder to appreciate some of the truly spectacular stories that explore masculinity because at this point it's largely the only option." (Thanks Ju.)

Amy's father is a thoroughly irresponsible parent. On Amy's arrival, his first act is to take a dangerous ride on a hang-glider of his own invention, leading to the first of the movie's many crash-landings. He is the one who allows – and facilitates – the idea that Amy should fly from Ontario to North Carolina to lead her geese in their first winter migration. It's obvious that this is a terrible idea, but he encourages Amy to risk her physical safety and frames the journey in a way that risks her emotional safety as well.

Fortunately her journey, and various antics leading up to it, are hilarious and beautiful. Like all of Ballard's films, his animal stars and the countryside are spectacular. He is also smart enough to avoid the worst of the potentially treacly story, keeping Amy's adventures engaging and light.

Fly Away Home is an apolitical film, but it presents a fascinating moral take on the world. Consider these two lists:

- Good guys in *Fly Away Home*: academics, the American military, hippies, TV stations.

- Bad guys in *Fly Away Home*: capitalists, park rangers, hunters, the Queen.

In the film's morality, these two groups are delineated in a simple way: you're good if you go about your business without negatively affecting others; you're bad if you assert your own desires as more important than someone else's. It's a kind of libertarian philosophy, but one where monolithic government-provided service providers – local TV news; scientists; the military – are considered to be essential to the social fabric. Those who blindly apply rules (aka 'laws') are not looked upon kindly.

It's refreshing to see a film where the United States is morally superior to Canada, to say nothing of the moral superiority of the US military over the Queen (!).

Having said that, the film is too black-or-white at times. Storytelling efficiency is clearly a higher priority than believable minor characters, some of whom are drawn in broad shorthand: the moustache-twirling evil property developer at the end leaps to mind.

The physical comedy in the film is often too broad as well. There are a couple of slapstick scenes backed by slightly Bennyhillian music, that feel as if they have been accidentally edited in from a bad children's film. It's a pity, because Ballard creates some hilarious moments: not wacky misunderstandings in various states of undress, rather a baby goose falling into a toilet.

If you can forgive these small mis-steps, you have a brilliant film. Ballard's scenes showing tiny goslings running around in Amy's footsteps are some of the best he's ever shot. And the scenes of the adult geese flying alongside Amy's ultralight aircraft are stunning.

Fly Away Home is easy to enjoy and packs an awful lot into 103 minutes. It's cheap too: I bought my DVD from Amazon, delivery included, for less than 1.50. You'd be crazy not to.

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This is the second of four articles on the films of Carroll Ballard. All four movies are great. Choose your species and join us:

The Black Stallion (horse) *Never Cry Wolf* (wolf): coming as soon as I find my DVD following a recent move *Fly Away Home* (goose) *Duma* (cheetah): coming eventually

Chapter 3

January

3.1   Interpreting An Avatar

So there I was, pretending to be a fox person (as all good stories should start), when I noticed something rather strange happening. It's probably telling that it wasn't me pretending to be a fox person that was the strange part, but I think by this point in my life I've so thoroughly integrated that aspect of myself, that avatar, that not having that at least at the back of my thoughts seems outlandish.

The something strange was twofold: first, I started noticing that the way in which I interacted with others when I was doing the fox thing, down to my speech patterns, was totally different from the way in which I interacted with just about any other part of my life. Additionally, that change in style had rather profound impact on the ways in which others interacted with me, or at least with this constructed avatar. The more I thought about it, too, the more I realized that this construction of our front-stage personalities goes further than just how formally, submissively, or whateverly we act, but all the way down into the nuances of language, the subtleties of inflection, and the smallest of gestures.

As to what happened, I'll need to go back a little bit, to about autumn of last year, in order to specify that I had left behind one of my old haunts – sort of taken a break from hanging out with some of the people that I'd spent so much time around previously. I'm not really sure why other than life in general was changing: I'd graduated, wound up in a new job, and was spending most of my time working or perusing a few time consuming hobbies. Jump forward to spring and summer this year, however, and I wound up back in the old online hangout that I'd spent so much of my life in the fandom.

Things had changed, though, as they often do. Along with a few pretty big changes in my own life had come a few more subtle changes in the way I interacted with others within the context of furry, and especially in the language I used. Whereas before, I tended to interact in what I supposed was a grammatically correct if rather flowery manner, a lot of the changes in the intervening months had resulted in a shift in my language usage. I noticed myself using more fragments, dropping the letter s from possessives and plurals, or adding it in in other places, dropping pronouns and repeating words. For example, if I we to greet, say, my friend Scruff, it'd come out as, "Makyo cheer, Scruffs! Hug and hug and hug." Another change was that I posed quite a bit more, and posed things that I probably could've said, instead (for those who aren't into these things, on a MUCK, one may pose an action or say things "out loud").

What had changed, in those months, to change the way in which I interacted with other people pretending to be animal-folk? Several things, I think. My friends group shifted, several things offline happened at once in March and after, and basically I just grew up a little, like you do. It was

one of those stretches of time where life seemed to actually advance by paces rather than holding still, and I think that had a bigger effect on things like how I interacted with others than one might have expected.

However, I don't think the change was all that surprising, nor restricted to furry. In the past, when I first started figuring out sexuality and how that played into my life, I bought into an expected stereotype – that is, I acted gayer because of my change in perceived sexual orientation, to the point where my husband said, at the time, that I was "too gay" for him. I had bought into that subculture, and as I drifted away from it over time, my affected interactions calmed back down into something close to what they were before, though certainly with more freedom to express myself than I'd had, the type that comes with integrating a previously rough edge into one's life. Similar things happened when I started trying to figure out gender, as well, and have similarly calmed down of late.

Much of this comes down to the idea of front- and back-stage. I brought this up way back when in order to describe the fact that we don't present the whole of ourselves when interacting with fellow furries, but I feel that I glossed over it, then. The idea of a front-stage persona artfully created to interact in a social setting is certainly important with furries, even if we tend to expose more of our back-stage workings to the people we're emotionally connected to. This is why I'm sticking to using the words 'persona' and 'avatar' moreso than 'character' (which slips in every now and then to keep things interesting): they more accurately describe the idea that we are constructing this version of ourselves to present to others, whereas, although 'character' fits in with the stagecraft metaphor, it's been overloaded within the fandom to be a sort of second-hand reference to these avatars that so many of us create for ourselves.

Just as interesting as the changes are the ways in which others interpret these front-stage avatars. In my case, and the thing that prompted me to think about this in the first place, this newer persona that I was presenting to others caused them to interact with me differently than they had before. Notably, the character was treated as if it was much smaller than previously – say, 5'2" instead of 6'2", and perhaps eighty pounds lighter – something to be hauled or pushed around rather than merely hugged or waved to. I should note that the location – a bar[1] on FurryMUCK – has what I think of as a standard mix of chat and inconsequential roleplaying that shows up fairly often on MUCKs and IRC, so such things weren't necessarily out of place.

What happens when we interact with those that we know more than passingly is that we tailor our actions to our interpretation of their persona. In such a case as furry, though, where that persona is often a carefully constructed avatar, that means that one is often actually guiding others' interactions with oneself. Of course, in any front-stage scenario, this is likely the case: viz. our

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[1]Of course. Makyo's first axiom: get enough furries together on the internet, and they will spontaneously generate a bar, club, tavern, or cafe in which to hang out.

contributors here on [a][s]. Each of us has a different way of getting an idea across (many of which are less wandering than this), and each attracts a different sort of interaction from readership, whether in post comments, interactions on twitter, or passing comments elsewhere. It's simply that in any situation involving any sort of role-playing (and here I don't necessarily mean playing out a story or even e-hugging someone online, but assuming a role as a character and going along with it), this becomes a vastly more intentional affair.

I know I've written plenty before about the whole concept of character versus self; this is the flip-side of it, the side seen from the perspective of those around us.

There's a phrase that Jon Ronson uses in his recent book The Psychopath Test that I think we can co-opt, with some modifications for helping to describe this: being "reduced to one's maddest edges." This is most certainly applicable to the way I changed the way I interacted when I came out.

Before it was removed completely from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the entry on homosexuality was changed to 'ego dystonic homosexuality', which was, in essence, when homosexuality caused one distress. It's now accepted that some forms of distress surrounding coming of age or the formation of identity are a healthy part of growth, but even so, during those periods of distress, one tends to focus and think quite a bit on what it means that they don't necessarily fit in society the same way they used to; one defines oneself by one's maddest edges, and when those edges aren't the roughest around, one finds that one has integrated what had been a problem into a part of one's identity.

Within our subculture, within the group of folks out there that create these additional avatars, reduction to a subset of one's total edges, perhaps the fuzziest ones if not the maddest ones, is simply a part of the whole game. In the process of creating a character for ourselves, we often enhance some aspects and cover up others. We willingly reduce ourselves to some of our best, furriest edges, and we all accept that as part of the story of social interaction within the fandom. We willingly guide others' interpretation of our selves and we're all okay with that.

I know ask this a lot with articles, but is this a furry thing? Probably not. I think there are a lot of instances, perhaps especially sexual orientation and gender identity as mentioned above, where membership in a community helps inform the edges used to construct that front-stage persona. However, I do think that a lot of this ties in with furry on some level or another. For one, there is the obvious connection to character creation, especially in a situation with such an obvious difference from oneself as species.

Beyond that, though, the fandom does seem to attract a lot of self-aware or other inwardly oriented folks, which I think helps build a community where avatars are so important. 43% of respondents, for example, agreed or strongly agreed that they both had a tendency to over-think things and were focused on a few specific interests, which is 10% higher than an even distribution

of the same (ref). Maybe I'm just over-thinking things, here, but I think it's not too surprising that a social group full of focused people would be so good at constructing personas for themselves simply in order to interact with each other. Not just constructing, but also being prepared to interact with someone who has done much the same, accepting their foxdom or wolfitude as part of their fuzziest edges.

3.2 Publishing Furry

In his recent article Of Rabbits and Rayguns, Phil Geusz described his fight to get the mainstream publishing industry to accept furry fiction. Phil is an accomplished writer, and he and I share a number of views and goals. He has chosen a different path than I have to attain those goals, but I think both paths are valid. In response, or perhaps complement, to his article, I'd like to offer my own thoughts.

I have for the past decade been becoming more and more familiar with the furry publishing industry. I have good friends at Sofawolf and FurPlanet and we talk business on a number of occasions. As a fairly high-profile author, I am always trying to figure out ways I can make our joint business more successful. At the same time, over the past two or three years, I have been talking with and listening to more people in the larger SF publishing world; mostly authors, but also some editors.

It's probably instructive to define a couple things before we get into the state of the industry and its attitude toward the fandom. First, I want to draw a distinction between furry fiction and fiction with furries. Furry fiction, by my definition, is fiction in which the furries are the prominent, if not exclusive, characters, and in which their existence is accepted as a given. Fiction with furries is fiction in which furries are an explained part of the world, possibly protagonists, but not necessarily.

To give examples: my *Out of Position* books are furry fiction. Kevin Frane's books are furry fiction. Watts Martin's *Ranea* stories are furry fiction (but closer to the line). The *San Iadras* stories of foozzzball are fiction with furries (but again, close to the line). Most of Phil's stories that I'm aware of would be in that same category, as would Cordwainer Smith's *Norstrilia* and other underpeople stories, C.J. Cherryh's *Chanur* books, Larry Niven's *Kzin* books, Alan Dean Foster's *Spellsinger* books, H. Beam Piper's *Fuzzy* books and John Scalzi's recent reboot…Fred Patten could probably add another hundred names to that list. Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, With Occasional Music* is also fiction with furries, but much further from the dividing line: the kangaroo is a secondary character, and while his existence is never really explained, he's also not that important to the story.

The reason to draw this distinction is that we in the furry fandom are used to furries. We are so used to them that now, stories that include the Origin Of Furries as a major part are very rare. We know all the origins: space aliens, created by humans (for war or sex, usually), or humans changed by magic or a virus (sometimes a magical virus). That is no longer as important to us as what the author does with the characters.

Non-furries, by contrast, often need the origin story, and so there is a gap between what is publishable in the furry fandom and what is publishable in the larger F/SF world (there is also a

gap because of the general quality of furry fiction and the barriers to publication, and that gap is actually larger than the gap attributable to world-building, but that's another post). And that leads me to the second thing I want to define.

The publishing industry is a business. It is a tricky business, because they are taking creative properties which people have a personal investment in and attempting to gauge how many other people will relate to those properties enough to spend money on them. Publishers tend to the conservative, because if they take too many gambles, and nobody buys the books they publish, they won't be publishing for very long.

In general, publishers lump book submissions into four categories:

1. This is awesome and everyone will buy it;

2. This is pretty good and we know we can sell it;

3. This is good but we don't think we can sell it;

4. No.

(It will not surprise you to learn that the vast, vast majority of submissions fall into category 4.)

Right now, there is no established market for furry fiction, not in the F/SF mainstream, not in the way that there is for space opera or Tolkienesque fantasies or wizard school stories. I'll come back to this in a moment, but what that means is that a furry book, or even a "fiction with furries" that is close to the line, pretty much has to fall into that first category to get serious consideration from a mainstream publisher. And I don't think that book has been written yet.

(By contrast, you will see from the above examples that there is plenty of "fiction with furries" in the mainstream market, and has been for decades. There's no publisher I know of that would reject a book they otherwise would have bought just because some characters in it are furries.)

But the good news is that there's another way to convince publishers that furry fiction is a winning proposition, and that's by showing them. This is what Phil is doing with his books; this is what short story sales to F/SF venues (Renee Carter Hall and Mary Lowd have both had that success this year) do; this is what strong sales by furry publishers do.

Here's where some of the burden falls on the fandom. The furry fandom is still small by comparison to worldwide SF fandom. In the fandoms' respective awards, the Ursa Majors, which are free to all, do not get as many votes as SF fandom's Hugos, which require a minimum of $50 to vote. Furry fandom is, I think, more active, more vibrant, and more creativebut furries just do not read as much as science fiction fans, whose fandom is centered around books.

Fantasy and science fiction books regularly make the New York Times bestseller lists; the industry supports thousands of midlist authors who sell thousands of books. I have friends in the

fandom who buy hundredspluralof books a year. In many ways, furry fandom is stronger than SF fandom; books, for the moment, are not one of those ways.

And this brings me back to the statement about there being no established market for furry fiction. There is, clearly, a market. Sofawolf and FurPlanet and Rabbit Valley manage to not only survive, but prosper, selling furry books, but they operate on a smaller scale than Tor, Daw, Baen, etc. The good news is that that market is growing. Phil has found success outside the fandom with his *David Birkenhead* series. I've found success outside the fandom with my *Out of Position books*. With every sale outside the fandom, we are showing people that they can enjoy stories with furry characters, and opening opportunities for more furry books.

It's a slow process, but that's the way these things happen. Are we ever going to convince everyone in the world that they should like furries? No. I occasionally see the same comments Phil talked about, from people who just have to tell the world how much they don't get furries, and you know what? That's fine. There are people who hate vampires, people who hate boy wizards, people who hate science fiction. In fact, I think the appearance of these protestors is actually a good sign. The fact that they feel the need to loudly state their objection means that they feel like they're in the minority. They look around and see other people appreciating these stories, and they don't get it, and because they don't feel like part of the "in" crowd, they have to justify their stance.

But I think it's a mistake to assume that mainstream F/SF publishers feel that way, simply because they say "we don't publish talking animal stories." I had a conversation with an editor from a mainstream F/SF publisher in which she said, "Why does there have to be a distinction between furry fiction and 'mainstream' fiction? Why can't it just be about good stories?" Amen. Remember, publishers are a business. If they find a story with furries that they just can't ignore, they will publish it.

Furry fandom is growing, and the market for furry books is growing. I've mentioned this before, but I think this past year was the first time all five Ursa Major Novel candidates were written by furries. I remember a time when you could walk through a furry con's dealer's room without seeing a single novel; now you can choose from probably about fifty of them.

Are they selling at a mainstream F/SF level? Not yet. But readership within the fandom is growing, and the fandom itself is growing. I'm pretty happy selling my books to the people who are passionate about them. The people who don't want to read them don't have to. I'm just glad that there is a big, growing community of people who do.

3.3   On Polynormativity

It started, as these things do, with a realization about myself.

I realized that I had feelings for someone else. Not the sort of feelings that one would call "love", for sure, but certainly the kind that are at least as strong as your average crush-that-warrants-more-exploring. Furthermore, I felt *bad* for having feelings for someone who wasn't my boyfriend, and in that kind of emotional avalanche that only humans seem to be capable of performing, I felt *bad* about feeling *bad* about noticing someone else. Because hey, I know several people that have multiple romantic partners, and even more people somewhere along the axis of "I'm 'attached to' one person, but we're open."

"But wait!", you say. "Why is this on [adjective][species]? What does this have to do with furries at all?" I'm glad that you asked. It turns out that furries, as a group, are incredibly polynormative.

First, a definition, if necessary: one of the great things about English is that I can make up a word like "polynormative" and its meaning should be immediately obvious, but in case that isn't the case, I'm defining it here as "more accepting and understanding of poly* cultures than the mean."

It is also relatively important that we make a distinction between "multiple romantic partners" and "multiple sexual partners", because as we'll discover, the difference in numbers is relatively significant. For the purposes of the survey, and this article, we call the former "mono/polyamory" and the latter "mono/polysexuality."

Both of these pairs are interesting, as each contains its own spectrum. The -amory spectrum runs from total monoamory, through sets of couples who consider one person to be a "primary" partner, to total romantic freedom. Similarly, -sexuality runs from total exclusivity, through what one commenter called "same-room openness" (both partners must be present, but they welcome a third or fourth sometimes), to total sexual freedom.

So now that the definitions are out of the way, let's talk numbers.

Unfortunately, the go-to group for sexuality surveys, the Kinsey Group, has done exactly one survey on polyamory and polysexuality. It's relatively fresh, being from 2000, but has one major issue: it was commissioned from Kinsey by a polyamory lifestyle magazine, and the respondents were all pulled from that magazine's subscriber base. It seems at least somewhat likely that subscribers to a poly magazine are already interested in the subject, which makes the Kinsey survey's extremely high numbers questionable. However, there are still a few things we can glean from this data: support for polyamory and polysexuality skews young, and skews male, both of which are the prime demographics of the fandom.
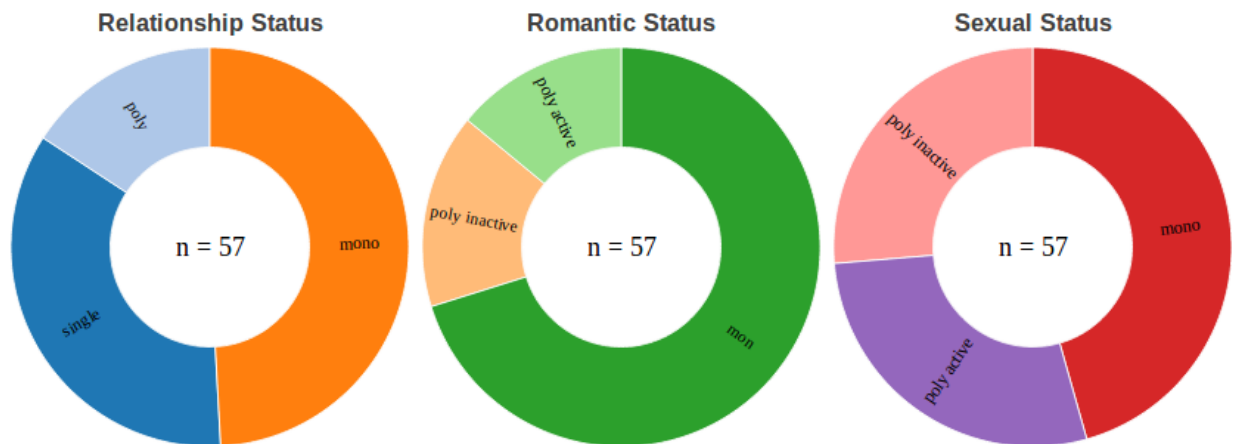
Figure 3.1: Monogamy/Polygamy survey results

Even so, we should find a different source for a decent base number to compare against. One of the standard first-pass texts for people interested in polyamory and polysexuality is a book called The Ethical Slut, first published in 1997, but recently updated in 2009. This book references several studies, a few of which I'd like to highlight:

The Finnish Sex Survey indicates that 8.9% of respondents believed that they could support a polyamorous relationship, and 8.2% felt that it was actually best for them at their current stage of life. This survey was only given in Finland, and thus only accounts for Finnish social norms, so take that as a caveat.

Blumstein and Schwartz report that 15-28% of married couples surveyed allowed for non-monogamy in certain cases. This jumps to 65% for gay men, which is highly relevant to the standard furry demographic.

By comparison, the numbers in the small survey we ran here at [adjective][species] paint a much different picture:

Comparing these two gives us a few interesting points, in isolation:

- Twice as many furries self-report as polysexual than as polyamorous.

- Three times as many furries report as polyamorous than in mainstream society.

- Twice as many furries self-report as polysexual than in mainstream society.

An interesting aside: before writing this article, I did an informal Twitter poll of "do you identify as monoamorous or polyamorous, and why?" The results, though I only got about two dozen

responses, closely mirror the results of the [a][s] survey, which is great. The body of respondents very likely does too, in that, of n responses, n-1 of them were from furries. My follower ratio is slightly less furry-tilted than many that I know, at about 70/30 furry/non-furry, so we can informally posit that furries are also more likely to talk about these things, too.

To move on, I'd like to see what we can explore from the points we gleaned earlier.

Being a furry conditions us to think that polysexuality is more normal than the mean.

Recently, I was at a friend's place for a weekly thing. The attendance list was "eight furries", as it usually is, plus or minus a few, but the point is, this is an event where furry social norms are in full force. Everyone greeted everyone else with a hug, there were 16 names for 8 people, all that jazz. At some point during the night, one of the attendants groped me. It wasn't incredibly invasive, as these things go: I told him to stop, people looked uncomfortable for three or four seconds, and that was that. He apologized, it didn't happen again, and all was good.

The interesting part of that event wasn't the event itself, but the discussions of the occurrence that happened after.

The host: "This is why I wish that I had some more non-furry friends."

This is a sentiment that I hear with alarming frequency, and could probably get its own entire [a][s] article. In general, it's assumed that furries are hypersexual, or at least more sexual than the average bear. This is also true of our assumptions of how the outside world sees us (ref), and statements like the one above do absolutely nothing to dispel that. "Well, if it had been a group of you and seven other random non-furry people, they wouldn't have assumed that you were okay being touched." The idea being put forth here is that, as a group of furries, physical contact is expected, and therefore, we've normalized it to the point that a random grope is as mundane as a handshake is to someone outside fandom.

This is an unfortunate supposition. After all, a person who expects his personal bubble to be maintained would be offended regardless of whether or not the person doing the bubble-bursting happens to be a furry or not. Attempting to legitimize it as "a furry thing" does active harm to the outside perception of the fandom as oversexualized. It also does no real good for the furs inside who would prefer a more typical set of rules of engagement.

Submitted as Exhibit B: A friend who wasn't there said to me after the fact: "Yeah, people do that to me all the time, because they assume that it's okay if I'm in a furry space."

Being a non-furry operating in a mostly-furry space can skew one's perception of norms

It's easy to see how this would be the case, but let's explore this a bit further. First, the social component: non-furries and furries alike accept the "multiple name" social construct to varying degrees. Personally, I attempt to find out a person's real name relatively early to avoid conversational awkwardness, as I would prefer to never have another conversation with my mother in which I have to explain why I don't know the name of the person who's crashed on our couch for three days. For a non-furry, this is even worse, as "We spent the day with my boyfriend and his friend, uh...Sheppenwolf..." is a risible statement in a great many contexts.

If we advance the clock a bit, it's easy enough to see how one can become immersed in this culture and normalize it. I, and by extension much of my social circle, have two friends that have legally changed their birth name to their furry name. Both have furry names that aren't readily identifiable as such, so it works, but in the event that they were named "Tikkamasalacat" or somesuch, a lot of people would shift readily. After all, we're used to using fan names as a primary mark. Mainstream society, not so much.

This translates very easily into the sexual side of the fandom, which I will discuss...now.

Being a monogamous furry can lead to conflict with the fandom's polynormativity.

This is something of a logical extension of the previous two, but it's worth touching on separately. At least one close friend of mine is strictly monogamous, and has expressed some discomfort at some of the standard furry social norms outlined above. This is a slightly extreme example, of course, but many people assume that it's okay to hug everyone they see at any sort of gathering, without actually asking. This probably shouldn't be the case, but many furries say that this is one of the things that they like about the fandom. Even so, one person's idea of openness is another person's idea of a popped personal bubble.

This bubble-maintenance can actually lead to some very interesting emotional backlash. Perhaps a monogamous furry feels as though he's cramping the style of the stereotypical furry by shying away from physical contact, or that maintaining monogamy is somehow counter to what the fandom wants or expects. I certainly went through a bit of this myself: early in my exploration of polyamory, I felt very weird for wanting to expand past my relationship, and that quickly evolved into "but most of the people I know have multiple partners, so maybe I'm just doing this wrong." For what it's worth, while most of the people I know do in fact have multiple partners, or have at least experimented with such, this is just selection bias, even within the fandom.

There's an interesting thing to explore hiding in there, too: how 25% became widely perceived to be a majority. Clearly, it isn't, but much like "every man in the fandom is gay", the assumption is often made that if you aren't naturally promiscuous, this fandom is not the place for you. There are a few possible explanations for this, at least some of which are erroneous assumptions in their own right: compare, for example, the perception that all of the art on FurAffinity is porn. It's actually somewhere around 23% (ref), and that's "mature" and "adult" art *combined*, but the fact that this is the art that gets the lion's share of the views and favorites means that the perception remains that furries are a lascivious bunch. Even if "only" 25% of the furries are in open relationships, they're sometimes more vocal and certainly more visible, and that makes one more likely to think in terms of absolutes.

To conclude: the fandom's polynormative nature makes sense as an extension of its openness in other ways. We have a drastically higher percentage of people who see a hug, rather than a handshake, as the standard greeting. I would also argue that the significantly higher favorite count on adult art means that people are often not viewing it in shame. So it's pretty easy to extrapolate that to the conclusion that people who are open in general, as well as open about what they like, will be more likely to go seek that out.

The last thing to remember is that, while we are statistically more open than others, that doesn't mean that consent isn't still of paramount importance. Play safe, and communicate, just like you would expect to do within your relationship, and everyone can get along just fine.

3.4   Why Zoophilia is a Furry Issue

Zoophilia is fairly visible within furry.

Most obviously, so-called 'feral' art is ubiquitous, and some animal characters – the cast of The Lion King comes to mind – seem to be minor sex symbols in some circles. More personally, furries sometimes actively denote themselves as zoophiles in social media, perhaps on their Fur Affinity page.

Klisoura's Furry Survey, which at its peak received over 9000 annual voluntary responses from furries worldwide, shows that 13-18% of furries self-identify as zoophiles. This does not mean that all these furries have had sexual contact with a non-human animal; these furries are probably just reporting sexual attraction. However this is significantly higher than the general population.

Little research has been performed on zoophiles. Serious attempts to study the phenomenon are limited to the last ten years or so, at a level that academics compare to analyses of homosexuality in the 1960s (ref). All of these newer studies rely, in part, on Kinsey's landmark 1948 study, Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male (link) for data on the incidence of zoophilia.

Kinsey estimated that 6% of American men have sexual contact with a non-human animal during early adolescence. The overwhelming majority of these cases were in rural areas. Such contact later in life quickly becomes vanishingly rare.

(There have been other studies, but none of any consequence. Notoriously, Alvarez & Frienharrefin 1991 reported rates of bestiality within the general population of 10% to 15% however this was based on a pitiful sample size of 20, all psychiatric staff.)

Kinsey attributes cases of sexual contact with non-human animals to young men lacking an available human partner. This is known as 'situational sexual behaviour': sexual behaviour that takes place because of a dearth of otherwise preferred options. Such situational sexual behaviour is not limited to zoophilia. There are many other examples, gay sex in prison probably being the most obvious.

Like prison, situational homosexuality is common in gender-segregated communities. Gay sex is endemic in the armed forces of countries that have compulsory military service, Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular (ref). (The Singaporeans have a particularly unusual way of managing homosexuals in their National Service: openly gay men are given restricted duties that depend on whether they are 'effeminate' or 'non-effeminate'. Straight but effeminate men, or otherwise nonconforming men, are also given special duties. I like to imagine that there are whole platoons of drag queens in the Singaporean army, possibly defending Orchard Road from last season's shoe fashions.) Homosexual behaviour between young heterosexual men is also widespread in Muslim East African nations (notably Sudan) and single-sex boarding schools (notably England).

Situational homosexuality occurs inside the male-dominated furry community too. I've written a full article looking at the availability of men (and unavailability of women) within furry – It's Raining Men – detailing the plight of the heterosexual male furry. Suffice to say that their options are limited. Furry is an open environment that fosters intimate friendships (regardless of sexual preference), so it's not surprising that many heterosexual young furries will engage in mutually enjoyable sexual contact with male friends. The blunt categories of 'gay' and 'straight' are not strictly applied in the furry world (like they are in general society), so a heterosexual can engage in same-sex behaviour without risking the ire of his peers, or provoking an unresolvable identity crisis.

Situational bestiality also occurs within furry, partly due to furry zoophiles making their animals available for sexual contact. And, as Kinsey showed, it's common for young men with access to non-human animals to sexually experiment during adolescence. Further: frank depictions of zoophilic activity are easy to find in the furry community, as is frank discussion on the topic. Given this availability, it's inevitable that some young male furries will explore this side of their sexuality.

Kinsey's estimate of the numbers of adolescent men having sexual contact with non-human animals (6%) was published in 1948. This was widely considered to be out of date by the mid-1970s (ref) and is even less relevant today. The reason for this is simple: we live in better connected and more sexually liberated society. The sexual revolution significantly improved the availability of women (and men) for young men; the proportion of people living in rural areas has declined; the spread of television provided a homogenizing influence on moral behaviour; the internet has significantly improved the connectedness of rural communities. The preferred mode of sexual contact is more available to more people, so situational zoophilia is much less common (ref).

Zoophiles today are different from Kinsey's farm boys. Those people engaging in sexual contact with non-human animals are much more likely to be pursuing it as a sexual preference. The number of zoophiles is small, and so congregation via the internet is common. The influence of the internet is the biggest difference between Kinsey's sample and today's zoophiles: the farm boys may have been influenced by a culture where sex with non-human animals was common, however this did not define the community (ref). Today's zoophiles congregate on the basis that their sexual orientation is an important part of their identity (ref).

And that's fair enough. Recent research strongly suggests that zoosexuality is a legitimate sexual orientation, a conclusion reached for homosexuality only in the late 20th century. I've written an article on this topic here on [adjective][species] – Zoophilia in the Furry Community – so I won't repeat myself. In short, studies over the last decade show that zoosexuals meet the requirements for a legitimate orientation in terms of sexual preference, fantasy behaviour, and love and affection (ref).

Zoophilia as a sexual preference will apply to some of the 15% (or so) of furries that self-identify as zoophiles. As I mentioned earlier, this question was probably interpreted by most responders as relating to sexual attraction only. This isn't the common definition outside of furry: non-furry zoophiles tend to differentiate between 'bestialists' – those who engage with non-human animals for sexual gratification only – and true zoophiles, who are concerned with welfare, perceived consent, and the sexual gratification of the animal (ref). However some of the furry 15% will meet the definition of zoophilia as a sexual orientation, and this number will be significantly higher than the general population, optimistically estimated to be 1% (ref).

Zoophilia is therefore a furry issue because zoophiles are a significant and visible part of our community. Like other unusually prevalent features of our community, as explored here in [adjective][species] – homosexuality, Asperger's syndrome, fluidity of gender, online relationships – the presence of zoophiles helps create and inform the wider furry culture.

Researchers into zoophilia have also made a connection: furry is included as a subset of zoophilia under a classification system proposed in 2011 (ref). Furries are specifically included as 'Class I Zoosexuals', along with other people who engage in psuedo-zoophilic human-animal roleplay (e.g. pony play). Alarmingly, the author suggests that furries might be 'treated' through behaviour modification therapy.

Fortunately, doctors and therapists are very accepting of unusual sexual behaviour. Even in the event that the classification of zoophilia formally includes 'members of the furry fandom', it's highly unlikely that any form of treatment would be administered by a halfway-competent doctor or therapist. As things stand today, treatment is not generally recommended for any zoophiles (or other paraphiles). Any furry, or zoophile, seeing a therapist with a different opinion should strongly consider finding a new therapist.

> A final disclaimer: I am not a zoophile. I have never had any sexual contact with non-human animals and I've never had any desire to. This disclaimer serves two purposes: (1) I don't want to be subject to the abuse that zoophiles are often subject to; (2) I don't want this article to be seen as self-justifying. Thanks for reading. It's not an easy topic.

3.5   First Cons and Consequences

It's often said that the worst day fishing is better than the best day working. In my life, the same can generally be said of fur-cons. While I haven't kept actual count I've probably been to fifty or seventy of the things, and am fortunate enough to financially be in a position where, if I have a weekend off and there's one within driving range, I can usually go. I consider Mephit to be my "home" con, and that probably says a lot about my taste in conventions. I prefer them small, intimate and inexpensive. While I've been to and enjoyed Anthrocon several times and will probably eventually be back, well…I don't know. Compared to the small cons the large ones feel impersonal. Commercialized. More about flash and gee whiz and Big Name Furs than ordinary people sitting around and making new friends.

Back when my columns were posted in other venues I sometimes wrote reviews of this and that con. Then I ceased doing so when I realized that these columns were garnering me a sort of "VIP treatment" that I didn't seek. (About the third time the chair of a con looked me up to "make sure I was having a good time" I sort of figured it out. And sure enough, when I quit writing these reviews the con-chair visits ceased.) All I want at a con are reasonable prices, ideally between twenty and three hundred furs to interact with (preferably a few of which I already know), a couple-three fursuiters running around from time to time, and some good (preferably writing-related!) panels to go to. The rest sort of takes care of itself, and most cons are well advised not to mess too much with this winning formula.

I've always been especially interested in attending "first-time" cons. There's an extra-special sort of magic at these, as a rule – even the things that go wrong usually just add more "flavor". I suspect this is because first-time cons have first-time con staffs, for the most part, who are fresh and unjaded and eager to make "their" convention work well. (I was at the first Rain Furrest, the first Furry Fiesta and I think the first MFF, among several others.) Everything is new and exciting to everyone, including many of the attendees, and a sort of magic fills the air.

Usually.

I have seen first-time cons crash and burn, however. It takes work, but I've seen it managed. So I'll complete this column by telling a few woeful tales and offering advice.

1) Registration

The very first thing congoers experience of a con is Registration. Organizing all those badge sales is difficult, low-profile work performed by people who are in most cases going to miss large slices of the con as a result. (I try to make it a point to recognize whoever registers me for the thankless

role they've volunteered to accept.) Sometimes poor Registration experiences are inevitable – computers crash, printers fail, etc. But, what's not inevitable are gross social and customer-service errors. I recently had the worst Registration experience of my life, when I was left standing at the desk for at least three and perhaps as long as five minutes while the Registration staff totally and completely ignored me even though I was the only one there. The staff spent the time chatting and working on some sort of craft-type project even though I was standing less than two feet away looking at them. Finally, at long last, the person sitting opposite me asked what I wanted. "To buy a registration," I responded.

Their eyes went wide. "Oh!" they said. "I thought you were with the (tool-related) convention! You're wearing a work shirt!" Then they proceeded to ignore me again for at least two more minutes.

And so, because I was wearing a work shirt (and probably because I'm a good bit older than most con-goers) I started this con off on a totally bad foot. So bad, in fact, that for the first time ever I resolved to inform the con chair about how badly things were being run in Registration.

Then, a little later, I learned that the con chair was the person who'd ignored me.

Which leads well into Point Two...

2) The con is about the attendees, it's not about the staff or the Guests of Honor

I attended both opening and closing ceremonies at this same con. I usually attend neither, as I generally find them boring. But this time I attended Opening Ceremonies in order to learn what the Con Chair looked like, and then Closing for the same reason that one gawks at a car wreck. At both events the speakers attempted to improvise instead of working from set notes, and the resulting chaos was all too predictable. In the end little to no useful information was transmitted. The staff spent most of the time referring to and congratulating each other instead of interacting with the attendees. They spend some time tossing candy/whatever into the crowd, but the products were thrown hard enough (and some were heavy and sharp-edged enough) to cause potential injury. Several of us attendees – total strangers – met each other's eyes and shook our heads at each other; it wasn't just me who disapproved. Apparently, pretty much everyone understands that blinding your guests is a poor way to begin a con.

Another thing I've sometime seen at cons, though not this specific one I've been citing, is a GOH who does their best to sabotage the proceedings. I've seen GOH's do truly awful things, like get so drunk that I've personally had to give multiple panels for them. But worst of all is when a GOH gets the idea in his or her head that the attendees are there for them instead of the other way around. A GOH, in my opinion, owes an even greater debt to the con and its attendees than

any staff member save perhaps the Chair him or herself. They're being honored in a unique and what should be humbling way. GOH's shouldn't just be willing to provide art/stories/whatever. They should actively make an effort to circulate, shake hands, and for heaven's sake show the unwashed masses that they're pleased to be honored! Good GOH's can make even a mediocre con memorable. Poor ones can make a wonderful con disgusting. Therefore, it's essential they be selected carefully and have a clear understanding of their vital role.

3) The Hotel Employees

It's natural that the hotel employees, especially for a Year One con, should stand with wide eyes and be amazed at the wonderful weirdness of it all. They're part of the con too, so why should they not enjoy a little of it? Indeed, I try to take the time to speak with them in a friendly way and explain what I can, when I can. Con Staff should absolutely do the same at every opportunity. Perhaps it's because I'm blue-collar myself and therefore I'm extra-sensitive to such things, but I don't often see Staffers interacting with the hotel workers in a fraternal way. People may not be aware of this, but when they give snippy, hurried instructions to someone they assume ipso facto must be stupid or they wouldn't work at a hotel, well... It's insulting as hell. This doesn't so much cause problems for a Year One con as it does down the road after repeated exposure, but I mention it here anyway because it needs to be dealt from the very beginning.

Hotel workers may be low-paid, but they're intelligent, sensitive fellow human beings asked to keep a straight face at some pretty outlandish stuff. They've got full, rich lives and interests of their own. At one con, for example, I met a waiter originally from New Orleans who had personally met most of the biggest names in Jazz, was probably a bonafide expert on the subject (I'm not qualified to say) and kept a huge private music library. Such individuals deserve as much respect as any congoer. Again, as a blue-collar guy myself I'm uniquely positioned to note that it doesn't help in the least when the person being snippy is half their age. And I'm also uniquely positioned to inform you that payback can be hell.

Trust me. You'll never regret making friends in low places. Especially at con hotels.

4) Programming

It's incredibly tough to set up programming at a first-year con. Usually there are few rooms available, and often even fewer credible Subject Matter Experts. I always prefer more panels at a con rather than less, on the grounds that then I always have something interesting to do. Therefore that's what I suggest to the first-year programmer. A poor panelist, so long as they're polite and civil and smile a lot, is generally better than no panelist.

On the same note... don't ever ask a panelist to share a room with another panel, or give a panel in a place like the Hospitality Suite. You're asking the impossible in such a chaotic environment.

5) Atmosphere

This one's tough, but I'll give it a shot anyway. I don't know about others, but I can walk into a room full of people and in a matter of seconds know if they're bored, happy, hostile or whatever. If you think about it, a very large part of the con experience takes place in the meeting rooms and other public gathering places. It doesn't take a con staffer, especially the chair, two minutes to physically go to these places, "sniff the air", and then if necessary do something to improve the situation. He might ask a GOH fursuiter, for example, to swing by the gaming room if it's "dead". Or, if the "social" area looks slow, he might sit down and chat with a few individuals, smiling frequently. Atmosphere is an elusive thing, yes. But you don't have to be passive and accept whatever comes. Go out there and do something about it!

And that's pretty much it, I suppose – Phil's take on How Not to Totally Screw up a First Con. I hope someone, somewhere has a better time for it having been written.

3.6   The Science of Zoophilia

Scientific research on human sexuality is a relatively new field. The Kinsey Reports, published in 1948 (men) and 1953 (women) (link), were the first attempt to gather data on human sexual behaviour. These were informally updated by Playboy in the 1970s (link), back when it retained some literary relevance, in an attempt to understand the changes brought about by the sexual revolution, and – of course – to provide some salacious reading material.

It took until the early 1980s for researchers to confirm that homosexuality is largely set at birth (ref). This work, controversial at the time, contradicted the prevailing wisdom that male homosexuality came about due to feminization of a male child, caused by an overbearing mother and distant father (the reverse supposedly applied for lesbians). This conclusion was simple enough to make: researchers interviewed a large number of people, asking about their childhood and sexual preference, then looked for correlations. (They found none.) And yet such simple data gathering took more than 30 years after Kinsey to be published.

The science of zoophilia is much less mature. Kinsey asked questions and gathered data (as did Playboy) however the first serious attempt to understand zoophilia was published more than 50 years later, by Dr Hani Milestki in 1999. Miletski's book suggested that zoophilia may be a legitimate sexual preference: one defined by love, not sex.

Miletski's book was followed by research from two long-time specialists in the fieldDrs Williams (wikipedia profile) & Weinberg (wikipedia profile), who started their careers studying homosexuality in the 1960s. (Weinberg, literally, wrote the bookin 1981that showed that homosexuality was set at birth.) The two are highly respected in their field, and their results agreed with Miletski when they published in 2003. Research into zoophilia has increased since then.

(The works of Miletski – *Understanding Bestiality and Zoophilia* – and Williams & Weinberg – *Zoophilia in Men* – are ~~available in full for free, and are~~ barnstorming reads. They are both recommended, Miletski in particular, although you'll want to gird your loins for some vivid language.)

The two works are notable for going beyond analysis and discussion of statistics: the authors clearly became sympathetic towards the zoophiles during the course of their research. This sympathy isn't evident in the results, but it is evident in their discussion of the zoophile lifestyle. They note that the zoophiles face unusual personal and ethical challenges as a result of their taboo sexuality. Williams & Weinberg make a direct comparison with the subjects of their early work, homosexual groups in a less tolerant era:

> They reminded us of some of the early gay groups we studied in the 1960s and 1970s,

especially when they engaged in banter about sex (in this case, it was not just sex with men).

Homosexuals in that era were seen as dangerous sexual deviants, similar to the way that zoophiles are seen today. However it is very clear from the results presented in Miletski and Williams & Weinberg that the relationship between a zoophile and his/her animal partner is based on love, where sex is an expression of that love.

This brings about a special problem faced by zoophiles: if you are in love with a non-human animal, where do you find human contact?

This is clearly a significant personal challenge for the zoophiles, especially given that they must hide their taboo sexuality from most people. Many zoophiles displayed a tendency to anthropomorphize their animals (ref Williams & Weinberg):

> When asked Is being in love with an animal different than with a human? approximately three quarters answered positively. The features the men mentioned were anthropomorphic in that they described ideal human love relationships. Ironically, humans were often seen as less able than animals to provide those ideal human characteristics.

This is a special kind of misanthopy, one where human emotions are projected upon an animal to create an ideal that cannot be met by a real human. This false creation of a perfect, or near-perfect, oxymoronical hyper-human non-human is only going make it more difficult for a zoophile to find real human contact.

Humans are social beings. We have evolved to need one another's company, and we communicate in subtle ways that meet our social needs. A relationship between a human and a non-human will always be one-sided, regardless of the perception of mutual love.

The zoophiles can end up with an unhealthy misanthropic perspective, a perspective I would compare with that felt by depressed people:

> I find the company of animals more pleasing than that of humans there's less stress, fighting Love with an animal is how love should be a lot less complicated with no strings attached. (Williams & Weinberg)
>
> I can identify with dogs a lot more than I can identify with humans. I am thinking a lot like dogs, and therefore I can understand dogs better than humans. (Miletski)
>
> I felt I could only trust animals. They didn't gossip, they didn't laugh at me, they were available most any time. (Miletski)

In these comments you can hear the reflected neuroses of the zoophiles. They feel that humans cannot possibly live up to their expectations, or that they themselves will fail to 'fit in' with society, so they regress and find reasons to avoid people altogether.

Marcel Proust, as ever, intuited this, framing depressive misanthropy as a reaction to a need to be part of (an untrusted) society. The following quote is from the second volume of *In Search Of Lost Time*:

> In a recluse, the most irrevocable, lifelong rejection of the world often has as its basis an uncontrolled passion for the crowd, of such force that, finding when he does go out that he cannot win the admiration of a concierge, passers-by or even the coachman halted at the corner, he prefers to spend his life out of their sight, and gives up all activities which would make it necessary to leave the house.

The sad irony is that those who have the least social contact are the ones most in need of social contact.

The other issue is, of course, the ethics of sexual contact with a non-human animal. Animal sexual abuse can sometimes be a problem (ref), and such behaviour is commonly assumed to be the act of a zoophile.

According to the researchers, making a connection between zoophilia and animal abuse is wrong. The zoophiles were defined by their love for the animals. Miletski states:

> The majority of my subjects love their animal-partner. Some see them as a spouse and will do anything for them. Sexual relations with the animal is an expression of love for them, and if the animal tells them, with its body language, that it is not in the mood for love-making, the majority of my subjects will leave the animal alone. In fact, many of them are members of the Humane Society and other organizations that are taking care of animals.

The ethical issues associated with zoophilia are important however I don't intend to explore them in detail here. This is difficult ground because of the strong moral reaction people often have to zoophilic acts (very comparable to the strong moral reaction some people have to homosexual acts). In general, researchers and ethicists on the topic (notably Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, ref) agree that the issue is whether the animal is harmed, and that the sexual aspects are irrelevant. This may be the subject of a future article (although, given my recent article on Why Zoophilia is a Furry Issue I'm a bit concerned about turning [a][s] into *Zoophilia Weekly*).

There is a small zoophile subculture growing on the internet. Zoophiles are expected to continue to congregate online, due to their small numbers and the benefits of anonymity. Many of them, including some who participated in Miletski's study, have engaged with the furry community.

This makes sense: furry provides what is important to zoophiles, namely a largely online-based culture with strong social connections, an emphasis on intimate friendships, and a safe environment for people of unusual sexual or gender orientations.

It's no accident that the researchers compare zoophiles today with the GLBT community of 50 years ago. Gay relationships were seen as an exercise in immoral sexual behaviour, however this has changed as homosexual relationships are now largely perceived to be about love. The zoophiles have not reached this stage, but they may find that the furry community provides a social environment where their love is tolerated as unusual but acceptable. If zoophiles can be open within furry, they can provide good role models for the 'zoo-curious', helping young people manage and accept an otherwise complex and difficult sexual orientation.

I expect the level of conversation within the furry community to improve over time as the number (although perhaps not the proportion) of zoophiles increases. We will see more intelligent, respected, well-adjusted zoophiles be open about their orientation within furry. Dismissive and offensive language will become marginalized, just like homophobic language has declined in general society in recent years. And conversation topics, online and offline, will move away from the presumption of abuse, and towards the real ethical and emotional challenges of being a zoophile.

3.7 Furries and Music

Furries and music definitely have a thing going on. I've wanted to write about it for quite a while now, but I've never quite found the right entry point, the right way to piece together a story about how the two might connect. I actually started thinking about the current topic when Klisoura of Furry Survey lore was in town over the week between Christmas and New Years, and the topic came up of how furries have a tendency to consider themselves "ahead of the curve" when it comes to music, television, and video games, or even trying new things, yet do not necessarily consider themselves to be hip or paragons of pop culture (ref). While I'm really as much of a fan of new music as anybody out there in this subculture, I wasn't quite sure how well this held up. What the data seem to be saying is that furries showed a tendency to eschew popular culture in favor of the type of things that would become popular culture. While some of our number may fit within that category, it's oddly specific for a subculture that doesn't, at its roots, have as necessary an intersection with popular culture as might, say, the fans of an actual genre of music, television series, or video game.

A survey is a survey, though, and can only really tell so much about those who really should be telling the story. I turned, instead, to Twitter, and invited an email barrage on myself to see what those who had the stories to tell had to say about the matter, asking "Do you think furries are more or less musical than non-furs?" and "Do you think furries are ahead of the curve in terms of music?".

Let me take a step back and say that I've always been kind of fascinated with the relationship that furries have with music. I spent the time and money (lots of the latter) needed to get a bachelor's degree in music composition, so I've always been, as I glibly put it on Twitter, super into music, and so I'd always wondered if maybe it was the crowd that I hung out with that was influencing my perceptions of furries as rather musically oriented folks, or if maybe it was just everyone. Another thing that piqued my interest, however, was the visible importance of music at conventions and in every-day chatter. The latter could be explained away by the fact that a lot of folks within furry aren't going to spend every second role-playing, of course, they're going to have conversations about the things that interest them, and music is a natural topic even outside the fandom. The former, however, intrigued me, even after I started regularly attending conventions. There were dances every night. There were dance competitions, dance competition try-outs, dance competition out-takes, dancing in the fursuit parade, dancing for no reason. Music seemed to be everywhere, from panels to the dealer's den, and it all made me pretty happy, if curious.

Furries, like everyone can be broken down into two, very rough, categories when it comes to things like music: creators and consumers. The act of creation plays a big role within the fandom,

of course. Given that we are, as was famously put, "fans of each other", we rely primarily on our own membership to create the art and stories appreciated within our subculture. Within music, however, things are a little more gray. The question of whether or not there is such a thing as furry music and what might define it is one for someone else to answer, but needless to say, there are still plenty of furry musicians. There are several out there that create music within the context of furry, post their music to FA, or perform at conventions (such as the jazz combo SuperPack at FC a week and change ago). "[T]he environment seems more conducive to the sharing of content in general, music included. Furry musicians have a built-in audience they can reach that many other aspiring artists might not." Vincent writes, and I think this is an apt description of at least part of the reason there is a music scene within our fandom, or indeed within many subcultures.

There's one more smaller subset we should probably take into account given the popularity of dances and the like at cons, not to mention the relative popularity of electronic music within the fandom, and that's the wide variety of furry DJs out there. The reasons for the popularity of this pursuit are varied, and hinted at by several of those who wrote back. Technological aptitude, diversity, a focus on sharing, and interest in EDM (electronic dance music) as trends within our subculture may help guide many toward DJing as a mode of expression, and notably as a way of sharing things important to themselves.

Beyond simply creating or creatively mixing music, though, we are avid consumers of music, at least commensurate with our strongest demographics. Soto writes, "From a consumption standpoint, I haven't found furries to deviate much from their non-furry counterpoints in the same demographics. For example, age group. Furries as a whole may be more passionate about music and stay more current with trends, but furries as a whole have that lovely age-skew toward the late teens and twenties, and that age group is generally pretty up on their music as it stands." That is to say, we're helped along by some of the categories that many of our members belong to in listening to and exploring music with the sort of enthusiasm that goes along with connoisseurship.

So, what about my two questions? As hinted about in the previous quote, opinions are mixed on the question of whether or not furries are more musical than their non-furry counterparts. In fact, after reading many of the responses, I don't think the question should be whether or not furries are more musical than their counterparts, but whether or not they have the conception that they are. Zenuel offers, on the positive side, "I like to think that the fandom simply offers more open and honest states of being[...]; a furry posts to a more receptive community like FurAffinity they generally receive more encouraging feedback, as well as having the backing of freedom that the fandom presents to the artist in question." Vincent acknowledges this, but warns, "This is a pro and a con, I've always seen furry as something of a 'hugbox' where criticism isn't forbidden, but it certainly isn't forthcoming. I've found that (at least in the realm of DJing) it's very, very hard to get good technical feedback on how to improve, and in many instances subpar mixing is lauded as

exceptional."

One advantage that we do have that we gain from being a decently coherent subculture is the fact that we are rather diverse in ways unrelated to some of our stronger demographics. That is, age and gender aside, our diversity in terms of backgrounds, social status, education, and so on does help us with the ways in which we deal with music. As Wolfdawn put it, "just being part of a diverse and unusual subculture would have to be a big [plus], since that alone makes people more likely to have been exposed to wider range of musical interests as they're shared among friends." I noticed a similar effect outside of furry when I moved away from my rather homogeneous upbringing and high school to college, where much more diversity was to be found. College was where I expanded beyond my own choral background into genres, classical and not, far beyond what I was used to. Furry was much the same, and in fact, much of this article was written listening to a playlist composed almost entirely of music suggested to me by cats, dogs, and all sorts of fuzzy creatures. In other words, are we more musical than the non-furries that surround us? Probably not. However, do we consider ourselves more musical than those around us at least in part because of furry? Often times, I think so, and a lot of these responses echo that sentiment.

As to the second question, you'll note that I put "ahead of the curve" above in quotes. These weren't meant to be scare-quotes, necessarily, but I would like to highlight something before I get too far. It's always very important to pay attention to the ways in which language is used. I know, I write about words a lot (using, of course, as many words as I can), but when I responded to the onslaught of emails with the two questions, I tried to do so using language that would invite people to provide longer, rather than shorter answers, because I think that the thoughts of those being asked are much more interesting than simple yes-or-no answers on the subject. It's the way that people interpret the questions they're asked, sometimes, that provides a lot of the answer. I understand that "ahead of the curve" can be a little misleading in terms of being able to provide a concise answer, and I'm sure I could've worded it better besides, but the answers I received in reply more than made up for it in their thoughtful and well-put responses.

Are we ahead of the curve? A lot of folks who replied indicated that no, we're not really all that ahead of the curve, at least not moreso than we might necessarily be given some of our demographic skews. There are a couple of reasons behind this, and one of the big ones is that the Internet and mass media in general hasn't benefited only furries. "The increased visibility of various scenes took away the relative advantage having a community that encourages sharing," writes Vincent, and this is echoed by a lot of my own perceptions: my composition professor went on a 'where is the drop?' joke spree with almost all of his students once dubstep became a more visible part of the music scene around us (the idea of being separate, here, due mostly to the fact that we were being classically trained in composition). That aside, however, Branwyn suggests that many "are in the same arena as non-furs – they consume music in the same way, influenced

by the same sources, regardless of quality." That is, being furry does not necessarily influence the ways in which we appreciate music, so much as some of the content that we listen to. We listen to the things our circle of friends listen to, in all probabilities, and I believe that much the same happens when it comes to visual art, for that matter; we don't enjoy visual art that much differently (though we do sometimes place quite a bit of importance on a visual representation of a character – ref), so much as enjoy the things that our chosen family and circle of friends also enjoy.

A possible explanation for all of this is offered by Forneus: "Furries are, I would argue, more musical than the mean, but not moreso than other geek subcultures." We are, of course, not the only subculture based almost solely around a shared, intense interest. The My Little Pony fandom has created a wealth of their own music, not to mention filking, which as a long and well-established tradition. Several of those who responded to the questions touched on the points of geekdom and technology, along with their ties to the fandom. One respondent talked at length about the fact that there are readily available tools on the market now, and, despite the fact that many, given such tools, will create music that might not be the best in terms of musicality and technical ability, they are still creating quite a bit (my own experiences with Reason are a testament to this, of course). "I think that if you put the tools in front of furries, they are more willing to try creating music than regular people," echoes Nathaniel Hahn; this does well at pointing out the fact that, rather than being more innately musical or musically hip, we may simply be focused on putting something out there given the tools we have for our subculture to enjoy.

Satori sums it up well, "We have geeks of all kinds, and some geek on their music. Others are too into geeking on other things that they don't make the time for it much." We're just us, in the end. We're a good mix of musical and non-musical fuzzies, no more or less of a mix than the world at large. We have things working to our advantage, such as our broad social circles, diversity, geekdom, the Internet, and so on, but no matter how large a part music plays within the fandom, we're still just us, and some of us will create, and others will consume. We're no less interesting for being a good mix, of course, and music does still appear to be quite important to us, but in the end, we're plenty good at focusing on being and appreciating animal folk.

Chapter 4

February

4.1 Service

In which the author describes the meaning of life.

We furries are a creative bunch. A large majority of us regularly engage in some sort of creative activity.

Looking at data from the 2012 furry survey:

- 46% of us are visual artists;

- 39% of us are writers;

- 24% of us are musical artists, and;

- 17% of us are fursuiters.

Assuming that few of the responders are creating exclusively in non-furry spaces, this means that a large majority of furries are actively adding content to our community. (I'm doing my part right now, writing this article on a sunny winter's morning for [adjective][species].) Very few of us are pure consumers.

There is nothing wrong with being a consumer. All furries are consumers of furry art, from illustration to performance, because it is art that defines our culture. Without this furry-created art - without furry-specific language, without drawn furry avatars, without fursuiters, without conventions - we wouldn't be able to express our furriness. At risk of being a bit postmodern, the act of consumption gives meaning to the art.

This is what makes our community different from sci-fi fandoms and the like: fandoms are based around pre-existing art, whereas furry is not. If you're a brony, then you like My Little Pony, and the social aspects of MLP fandom are a nice bonus. Furries have no such common element, which makes our culture dynamic and exciting, if difficult to pin down.

(Here at [adjective][species], with a handful of different writers and over one hundred articles, we're mostly just exploring the question: what is furry? Or, maybe: what is a furry? Anyone with interesting ideas should visit our Contributing page and make their pitch to our fearless leader, Makyo.)

Furry creatives are collectively putting a lot of time and effort into the community. In the overwhelming majority of cases, that time and effort is donated with no expectation of monetary gain or even wide recognition.

To look at a few examples:

- Kyell Gold and Phil Geusz, who are probably furry's two highest-profile and most successful writers (as well as being contributors to [adjective][species]). Both are doing well, but the time spent learning their craft and writing their first few books needed to be rewarding in its own right. They are the vanguard of an army of furry authors, most of whom are self-publishing in the morass of Sofurry, enjoying their time in front of the keyboard and appreciating the few readers they are able to find. Phil, who writes for [a][s] as Rabbit, has contributed many articles since joining us last year: he has done so for the same reasons as our anonymous Sofurry hordes, because he wants to contribute to the furry community.

- Potoroo, furry musician and friend of [a][s], runs a regular furry music podcast, Fuzzy Notes (fuzzynotes.podomatic.com). He collates and advocates music created by furries, for a furry audience. Music isn't really furry in the way that a drawing can be furry, at least outside of the likes of Kurrel the Raven (stop reading and go listen to his Commission Song right now if you haven't heard it). Yet Potoroo has an endless stream of quality music, by-furries for-furries. For our furry musicians, limiting their primary audience to furries comes at the benefit of contributing to the community as a whole.

- Oz Kangaroo is a fursuit performer, fursuit maker (www.crittercountry.com.au), and organiser of the Furry Down Under convention. Like Kyell and Phil, Oz didn't start with the expectation of success. His skills have been learned over time, and his early contributions to the furry community were largely anonymous, motivated by the enjoyment of the process.

Furry's creatorsa group which, dear reader, probably includes youare rarely motivated by personal gain. There is value in contributing to the greater whole, helping define the culture of the furry community. It's not selfless (and therefore not an act of charity), but it is immensely generous.

Furry, with its cartoon animals and imaginary worlds, is easy to interpret as a childish pastime. But this is missing the point: furry is about internal exploration of identity, something which niftily translates into an external world of intimate human friendships. This external world is something which we create ourselves. Our apparently childish pastime enriches our culture and informs our tight-knit community.

And it's the community aspects of furry that make it really special. A broad, interesting community isn't an easy thing to find in the twenty-first century. Today, people tend to exist in urban environments or online, where it is easy to find people who share niche interests. We group ourselves with people who are similar, and often define ourselves based on these delineations: we spend time with people of similar age, or education, or obsession, or professions, or even something as fundamentally unreal (if important) as money. Once you tar yourself with such an brush, it can be difficult to grow as a person, and explore the world outside of your niche.

Furry is a group without such limited horizons. Our community is the product of the things we create. Our decentralized nature means that our creations grow informally, like a meme: ideas become widespread as they are adopted by the separate, overlapping subgroups within furry. And even unsuccessful ideas have value: they are consumed and appreciated by an immediate audience of friends and similarly-minded furries. The furry culture is one that respects the act of creation, regardless of perceived quality.

We creators are serving the community. Our acts of service help build our world, and being a part of this communal effort provides meaning to life. Time spent in the act of creation, the act of service, can be internally rewarding and be appreciated by those we share our lives with. We contribute to our own environment, we build a culture that we can enjoy, and this adds to the feeling of inclusion within our community.

We furries are lucky. Other communities are often not as tolerant or welcoming, a point which leads me to a final story:

> D. Michael Quinn is a Mormon historian. His research and publications put him at odds with the Mormon church leadership, who didn't accept his findings on past actions within the church that were at odds with the church's current moral stance. (Further reading here.)
>
> As a scholar with a belief in truth and evidence, Quinn continued to publish before his eventual exile and formal excommunication from the church. Stripped of his career, at age 63 he was reduced to sleeping on a sofabed in his mother's one-bedroom condominium.
>
> Just before his excommunication, Quinn was given an opportunity to testify before the church. He expressed his gratitude to the church for providing, throughout his life, a vehicle for service. The Mormon church, he said, drew him out of his largely monastic life and compelled him to help the men and women he saw every Sunday.

As far as I can tell, that's a life with meaning.

4.2   Birds of a Feather

It's so trite that it's an eyeroller. But that doesn't mean it's not true. Birds of a feather do flock together, even when the "birds" in question lack bills and plumage. I'd guess this is especially evident in my native United States because our population is among the most culturally diverse on the planet. Take my original hometown of St. Louis, for example. During my childhood Italian-Americans lived in a neighborhood called "The Hill", while German-Americans (commonly referred to as "scrubby Dutch", and half of my own ethnic heritage) mostly tended to live on the South Side and in the inner southern suburbs. The city's small but prosperous Lebanese population also lived towards the south end of town, though not so far in that direction as the Germans. Old-money rich folks lived mostly in a now-decrepit area not far from Forest Park, while more recently prosperous families bought homes in the suburbs of Ladue or Brentwood. Artsy types were mostly clustered in a couple little zones near either Washington University or Webster College, in Webster Groves. The gay community was very small in those days, but even so Tower Grove Park and the neighborhoods immediately surrounding it were closely associated with what little activity there was. The North Side of St. Louis, as well as the adjoining suburbs, have been home to most of St. Louis's African-American population for as long as I can remember and probably much longer.

St. Louis isn't at all unusual in how the various social and ethnic groups are geographically clustered; choose any American city and you'll see pretty much the same pattern repeat itself over and over again. In fact, it doesn't even take a city-sized population for the trend to manifest itselfnot far from my current home in Middle Tennessee a group of artists are trying to start an "art village" in what was once a cluster of vacation homes overlooking Kentucky Lake, pretty much out in the middle of nowhere. It seems, in other words, that "flocking" of this sort is a basic human behavior pattern. Sometimes the clustering is involuntary and/or due to economic discrimination and racism, as in the old-style Jewish ghettos of Europe and arguably in the case of many of America's worst urban nightmare-neighborhoods of today. For the most part, however, the decision to live together in culturally-distinct groups is clearly a voluntary choice by groups of individuals who share much in common and wish to live a lifestyle together that's optimized towards their own specialized wants and needs.

We furry authors have been taking advantage of this tendency almost since there have been furry authors. The "Blind Pig" storyverse is just one example among many; it's adventures are centered on what amounts in social-function terms to a gay-type bar located in a distinctly furry neighborhood. (Yes, Blind Pig characters sometimes are not furry and suffer from unrelated issues that have nothing to do with anthropomorphism. But let's keep things simple for the purpose of this essay.) I've seen this pattern repeated in more furry stories than I can remember, and even

in stories in which there are no normal humans I often note references to "the canine district", "Vulpine Alley", "The Warrens", etc. "Neighborhooding" is such a basic, familiar phenomenon that it's hard for human authors to imagine a world in which it does not take place.

Now, let's take it one step further. Recall the St. Louis neighborhoods I cited. Most were based on ethnicity. But...

...one was the gay district. And another was the "artsy parts of town".

After attending as many furry conventions as I have and watching the fandom interact with itself, I've often wondered. Will we, someday, become culturally distinct enough from mainstream society to form a neighborhood or our own somewhere? Real-life, I mean - not fictionally.

I mean, think about it. Ears and tails, when we choose to wear them, mark us as visibly different from society at large in very much the same way as a Hassidic Jew is visible. Our tastes in recreation and art are also notably different - how many non-furs so love to wear whimsical costumes in public? In a furry neighborhood, game-shops would flourish and suit-makers would operate little boutiques in the most expensive parts of town. People would hug each other openly on street-corners, while perhaps on the busiest street corners professional suiters would "busk" for tips and photo opportunities. Tourists would come from all over to see this, which would in turn mean souvenir shops and nice hotels for them to stay in. Policemen and street repair gangs would be free to wear - or not - ears and tails on the job, while art would be everywhere.

It's doable, I think. Unlikely, yes - at least in my lifetime. But eminently doable, and probably economically viable as well. A large furcon is a lot like a temporary neighborhood, in that it provides structure and security for a large population for a few days. So, in a sense, a furry neighborhood would just sort of be like a large con that simply never ends. And isn't that a wonderful thought?

I once wrote a story based on this premise entitled "Pelton". In it, several thousand furs backed by a multi-millionaire buy large parts of a failing downstate Illinois town in order to create a furry "homeland". (It's available at http://tsat.transform.to/stories/pelton.html for anyone who wishes to read it, but I'll offer advance warning that it's one of my earliest works and therefore needs re-editing badly. Someday I'll get around to that...) Between the furs, the poor befuddled Old People who predated the anthropomorphic invasion and the eternal fandom-type drama that was always waiting to rip and rend everything that'd been so carefully built, well...It was quite a challenge for the man unfortunate enough to be Mayor. Yet in the end, like our fandom itself the grand experiment proved capable of giving birth to something...Beautiful.

Do I really expect to live to see it happen? Not really, unless we're lucky enough to find the kind of deep-pocketed backer I specify in my story. But...

...just on the off-chance, I vote for someplace with a warm climate and affordable housing like Florida or Texas. And...Please call me early, because I want to buy a house with a balcony

overlooking the town square!

Chapter 5

March

5.1   A Horse's Thoughts About the Horsemeat Scandal

Over here in the UK, there's been an extended brouhaha after many cheap TV dinners, known as 'ready meals' locally, were found to contain large amounts of horse instead of the promised beef. Some of the meals contained 100% Pure Horse.

Nobody knows how long the horse has been there. It only came to light because a branch of the Irish Government performed some DNA tests and announced the presence of our equine friends in mid-January. And it's been in the news since then.

I think it's worth discussing here on [adjective][species] because it relates to our relationship with animals. Also, I'm a furry horse, so I get asked how I feel about horses as a source of meat.

The short answer: I feel ambivalent. The longer, more entertaining answer: I'm fascinated how this scandal has come about, been reported, and – most importantly – how my furry friends have reacted, often wildly differently depending on their relationship with their species of choice.

It's easy enough to understand how horse ended up labelled as beef: the European Union, which includes the UK, is an open market and goods (including meat) can mostly be traded freely. In the UK, our big supermarkets compete in a desperate race-to-the-bottom to be the cheapest, regardless of quality. They advertise that a pint of milk is 1p or 2p cheaper. A tin of tomatoes will cost me 30p, but they'll be unripe. I can buy a mass-produced chicken for 2, whereas an ethically-raised one the same size will cost me about 15. The drive for a lower price drowns the desire for a higher quality.

It's the same drive that sees high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) everywhere in the USA. HFCS is sweet and cheap. Nevermind that alternatives taste superior, or that HFCS is metabolised in a way that reduces feelings of satiety: people want to pay less for their soda.

Horsemeat is perfectly legal in the UK. It's also about half the cost of beef and, apparently, is indistinguishable in flavour. The meat used in ready meals is largely sourced from outside the UK, because it's cheaper. And so horse has found its way into beef products via suppliers competing for supermarket business, where the strongest criterion for success is price.

The British press, for their part, have been competing to see who can generate the most outrage. The tabloids have dealt in the usual xenophobia, while the broadsheets look for something – anything – that allows them to be upset without dabbling in racism. Is there even a problem with horsemeat? After all, it is routinely eaten, if a bit déclassé, in France and elsewhere to no apparent ill effect. So the UK newspapers have decided that horsemeat is unsafe because UK horses are sometimes treated with a painkiller that isn't safe for human consumption...eliding over the fact that the ready meal horses are sourced from elsewhere, and that there is no problem with such chemicals elsewhere in the horse-consuming continent.

I'm sure that there are countless other examples of cross-border intrigue and scandal all over the EU, and I'm sure they seem as equally quaint to disinterested observers.

Some will argue that there is an ethical issue with horsemeat, that it's wrong to eat companion animals, or that horses have special capacity for pain, or fear, or some other form of suffering. These arguments are valid—moral arguments always are. However anyone who hesitates at horse yet pounces on pig – the porcine are at least the equal of equine in intelligence and companionship (if not HP) – might politely be called self-contradictory.

Yet the fact remains that horses are special for many people, including many furries. The furry identity is usually attached to a specific species (or two), and some horse furs have a special affinity for their pony pals. For rhetorical purposes, I'm going name such hypothetical horse hangers-on as Gullivers, after Swift's eponymous traveller who ultimately shuns human habitats for exclusive equine esteem.

Altivo, one of our favourite commenters here at [adjective][species], is a Gulliver. I think/hope he'll have his say in the comments, so I won't speak for him here. If you're interested, he's written eloquently on the topic in his journal.

Another furry friend of mine is a more vehement kind of Gulliver. His response to the idea of horses as food:

> The whole concept fills me with horror and revulsion, and I have to say I felt suddenly sick at the sight of the topic…I think you know of my professional involvement in animal welfare, and I am not a vegetarian. I know some allege this as hypocrisy, and I know issues such as comparative intelligence and whether animals have names or not are not reasons to discriminate what one eats and what one doesn't. There are, however, welfare issues in the transport and handling of slaughter horses which have a direct bearing. These are matter of scientific fact. [. . .] Even without these important issues, on a personal level I draw no distinction between eating horse and eating dog or cat, or, indeed, human. I would do none of these things (although personally the idea of eating dog, cat or human horrifies me less), and the very idea makes we want to vomit.

That response is taken from an old journal of mine, where I pondered the idea of eating basashi, a sort of Japanese horse carpaccio, which was offered to me while visiting Tokyo:

(I didn't eat the basashi. I'm vegetarian, contributing my part to the predictable phenomenon that sees furries twice as likely as the general population to avoid meat altogether, as discussed in an [a][s] article from last year.)

Some furries have the opposite reaction from the Gullivers, and actively consume their own species, sometimes as an expression of their furry identity. (Most common, in my experience,

Figure 5.1: Basashi

among furry deer and bulls.) I haven't come across any horse furs who look to devour horseflesh, however those in UK looking to express themselves in such a way have more options nowadays: the scandal has seen horse openly introduced to menus across the country, as pubs and restaurants cater to the curious.

There is nothing wrong with being horse-curious, no more than there is being vegetarian, or being a Gulliver. For those that think about it at all, meat is a moral issue, by which I mean that it's unreasonable to apply universal definitions of right and wrong. There are cultural norms and politics at play here: imagine the hypothetical reactions among people you know to eating dog, or guinea pig, or scorpions. The consumption of animals – living, breathing, tasty things – provokes strong responses in many people. The righteous might keep that in mind before they start telling the rest of us how to think.

It's the thinking that's important. And I'm interested to hear your thoughts below.

5.2 Food Stuff

I probably shouldn't even attempt to write this article. I lack any real background knowledge on the subject, and have no academic credentials of any kind whatsoever. While I enjoy writing and contributing the occasional essay, I really ought to be devoting the time to my fiction-writing career instead just now; it's at a crucial point, and not in a good way. Nor will many people will read this compared to my works of fiction. I'm beginning late at night after a long, hard shift at work knowing full well that I've got to get up extra-early tomorrow, and this after going short on sleep last night for other reasons entirely. In short I'm a damned fool to be sitting here typing this. And yet here I am, pounding out the words into my iPad at the local 24-hour eatery.

Why? Because I feel a strange compulsion to do so. A compulsion, I feel, that has much to do with not only who I am as a person, but also why I'm a fur. And it was inspired, of all things, by a coincidence in timing. Just days after finishing the final draft of a novel that in large part deals with the taboo of human cannibalism, I watched with wonder as the British media erupted in outrage over the discovery of horsemeat in the human food chain.

Now, after writing hundreds of pages dealing with the ethics, morality and psychological after-effects of consuming human meat under survival conditions, well…I have to admit that at first I found the controversy more amusing than anything else. A late Canadian friend of mine was a big fan of horsemeat as a delicious, healthy and cheap alternative to beef. (And yes, as a matter of fact he was an equine-type furry. Whyever do you ask?) This same friend was always mildly amused that horse was banned as a foodstuff in so many countries. For my own part, I spent a couple years working for a fast food chain that was up until that time perhaps best known for having one of their Australian suppliers caught substituting kangaroo meat for beef patties. The tainted shipment never made it to the public, but a good decade or so after the story broke people were still joking about "bouncyburgers".

Both then and now, I have a great deal of trouble understanding why people get so worked up about this sort of thing. Dead flesh is dead flesh, and even if we limit ourselves to the Western tradition of cuisine we consume a staggering variety of the stuff. Within the past year I personally have eaten dead pig, dead cow, dead chicken, dead sheep, dead shrimp, dead fish of more varieties than I can name, dead clam, dead scallops, dead crab, dead lobster, dead frogs and even dead alligator. (Sorry, I've never tried dead snails. Though I'd be willing!) This list covers all five orders of vertebrates plus several invertebrates. And you know what? It all tasted pretty much the same. The invertebrates less so, granted. But if cooked in unfamiliar recipes, I doubt that I could name any of these meats solely by taste. They're all pretty much pure protein; if you want variety in taste, the vegetable kingdom is without a doubt the place to look.

Obviously, then, our preferences in meat-animals are driven largely by factors other than flavor. Most Europeans salivate over hot roast pork, a Bedouin licks his lips at a platter heaped with roasted camel, some Indian gourmets reportedly roll their eyes over monkey-brains, and in certain parts of Asia nothing makes a diner happier than well marbled dog steaks. While I've never tried most of these. . .

. . . how much do you want to bet they all taste pretty much the same?

Ethically, I have to admit, I consider them all pretty much the same as well. While I'm very much a meat eater, it's not because I think that routinely killing self-aware beings is a good idea. The fact is that I am a creature of very little to no dietary self-control. I'm grossly overweight as well as being a carnivore; being so fat is merely another manifestation of my own lack of self-discipline. As a six-year-old I once wept at the death of about a half-dozen trees that'd stood for years on my grandparent's property; they'd grown too large to be safe, and so had to be cut down before they fell on the house and crushed it. Part of me has never quit weeping at the uncounted thousands of creatures I've consumed or otherwise killed since. And yet. . .

I also recognize that I'm a born carnivore as well. I've taken a couple-three classes in anthropology and read numerous books on the subject. This is more than enough to make me fully aware of the massive behavioral, cultural, and even physical effects that the act of hunting has had on the development of mankind. A major change of diet is a radical thing in terms of evolutionary pressures, a massive driver of change. When our ancestors were insectivores, we were tree shrews. When we were (mostly) vegetarians, we were apes. When we became hunters, we became men. That's an oversimplification, yes. But it's not all that much of one, which underlines the importance of diet to who and what we are as a species. I'm the son and great-great-great to the nth power grandson of the finest, deadliest hunters this planet has ever produced. My genes, my very identity and the manner in which I view the world necessarily reflects this truth. Should I be ashamed to eat meat? More ashamed, say, than a Bengal tiger who's not half as capable and versatile a hunter as I am?

There are a thousand million arguments in regard to the ethics of meat-eating, and I don't intend to even begin to deal with them all here and now. Suffice it to say that I, as a dedicated technologist, believe that the single greatest techno-ethical advance in human history lies not far in our future. Soonwithin my lifetime, I very much hope, though I don't have all that long left we will finally perfect the "vat-grown" meats and meat products that science fiction has been predicting for fifty or more years now. Meat that's grown with no brain, and comes packaged with no conscious mind that must be snuffed out prior to consumption, in other words. On that great day, perhaps the seven-year-old in me will finally take a day off from weeping at the tragedy of it all and enjoy a nice guilt-free t-bone steak. It'll be the finest one I've ever had, I assure you. Make it medium-well, please!

Some meat-linked eating traditions are easier to understand than others. Despite the fact that thousands of protein-starved adolescent midshipmen of who knows how many navies thrived on them during the Age of Fighting Sail, one can appreciate why most cultures frown on eating rats. My own Ozark-mountain ancestors, perhaps up to and including my grandparents, almost certainly relished a well-cooked opossum. Yet today only a small fraction of American households would even consider eating one; the more one learns of the dining and personal habits of the common 'possum, the more understandable this viewpoint becomes. I know of no culture that eats much in the way of voles and mice; they're not worth the effort of catching and cleaning for at best a forkful of meat. But the world's religious prohibitions on meat, well. . . . They're pretty much beyond me. From where I stand, they look almost. . . Random.

One other thing I've noticed about food animals over the years is that they seem to get very little respect in our fandom. While many ancient Amerindian cultures are totally centered on the corn plant and it's essential role at the root of everyone's lives. . . Well, let's put it this way. How many fursuiters do you see at the average convention dressed as a cow or a chicken or a pig? Rabbits excepted, you see almost no food animals of any sort (and you can be pretty sure that the bunnies don't as a rule hold the nutritional benefits of their species-of-choice foremost in their minds). How odd, that the animals we benefit from most of all are the ones that most commonly serve as the butts of our jokes and get the least respect!

Culture, evolution, food. . . All are intertwined so perfectly and so thoroughly that the closer we examine them the more the threads merge and become one. What a wonderfully complex and mysterious world we live in!

5.3   Love for an Inanimate Object

Some words of unwarning: this article is not about plushophilia, at least not in the sexual sense.

I like to mention sex in the first few sentences of my [adjective][species] articles when I can. I think it provides an engaging hook, something to help keep the reader enthusiastic while they wade through a convoluted premise, or parse paragraphs of statistics. (I sometimes even imply that an article has salacious content when it doesn't.)

Plushophilia, in the sexual sense, does exist within furry but it's marginal, at around 8% of furries according to the Furry Survey (ref). My guess is that stuffed animals are a true paraphilia (i.e. sexual fetish) for a small subset of this small fraction. In furry's first wave, media coverage would often look to equate furry with plushophilia, in a clumsy attempt to explain our community as an entirely sexual phenomenon. It's safe to say that any conflation of furry with plushophilia is wrong, and that the collective furry groan whenever someone refers to us as 'plushies' is thoroughly justified.

A lot of furries, of course, own stuffed animals. It's one of the ways that the furry identity manifests itself in the physical world. And it's normal for furries to have an emotional attachment to their stuffed animals, without the sexual objectification associated with paraphilia.

I'm an example: I'm a competent adult who owns a dozen or so stuffed animals, and I'm emotionally attached to them. I like having them around: I have a stuffed zebra with me at the moment to 'help' me write this article. He provides a faint presence, social but without any social requirements. He is a substitute for quiet company.

A different person might like to have the TV on in the background at a low volume. The illusion of motion and life is equally unreal, but it provides enough of a reminder of a real presence to make us feel warm and appreciative, preventing a room from feeling cold and unwelcoming. It's a phantom of a human connection, just enough to work on a subconscious level.

I also like to take a stuffed animal when travelling, especially when travelling solo. They make me feel less isolated.

Happily for me, we live in a world where it is mostly okay for a grown man to discreetly carry a stuffed animal around. They are not a societal norm in most non-furry spaces, so I don't openly display them, but I don't actively hide them either. If one of my stuffed animals were to be revealed in the presence of, say, a work colleague, I wouldn't expect a negative reaction. It would be a minor eccentricity, nothing more.

There are some objects where it is completely socially acceptable to reveal an emotional attachment. Such objects are often said to have 'sentimental value', an indication that an emotional

attachment makes the object worth more to the owner than to a disinterested third party. Examples might include a childhood teddybear, or a motor vehicle, or sports memorabilia.

On the other hand, some objects are not socially acceptable. One example, one that parallels with furry in some ways, is the 'reborn' subculture. This group, largely made up of post-menopausal conservative women in the United States, own and care for ultra-realistic baby dolls.

Like furry, the reborn subculture is occasionally profiled in the mainstream press. They receive a common reaction, and an interesting one: people find it creepy.

Creepy. Disturbing. Repulsive. Yet no harm is being done. Clearly, these dolls are providing their owners with an emotional need. So why are people – possibly including you, dear reader – reacting negatively to something which is unambiguously positive?

Outside of some internet-savvy groups, furries sometimes receive a similar reaction. This reaction is the reason why furries are regularly asked to appear on freakshow/reality TV shows: the producers know that the viewers will have a strong, visceral reaction. (Such TV shows and media often play up the sexual component of furry for the same reason.) Like members of the reborn subculture, we furries are harmless, pursuing an unusual interest because it makes us happy.

Figure 5.2: Image from Rebecca Martinez's Pretenders series

So why the negative reaction?

Given that the reaction is automatic, this suggests it is a normal feature of human social behaviour. My guess is that people innately react negatively to people who are 'different', and that this has an evolutionary biological explanation. People with unusual emotional needs may be less socially able, perhaps where this is sign of mental dysfunction. Unusual behaviour can weaken, or even destabilize, social groups. The negative group reaction, therefore, may act as a social countermeasure, to 'normalize' the outlying individual. Some outlying individuals will successfully moderate their behaviour within the constraints of whatever the social group considers normal, while those that fail to normalize are outcast.

Gay people faced this problem in most parts of the world throughout the 20th century. Society has become more accepting over time, however it is still a problem in some parts of the world. It's a component of racism. It's an ongoing problem for many people with unusual sexual identities.

For we furries, societal pressures are a common consideration, especially in non-furry spaces. Some lucky furries with internet-centric lives, perhaps those with work in the IT sector, might be able to be completely open with no negative consequences: like my travelling stuffed zebra, it might be considered to be a harmless eccentricity. For most of us, furry is something best kept largely private, or perhaps shared only among close friends.

Many people in my living and working world would, I believe, find furry to be creepy. I like to have control over my outwards-facing facade, and so furry is something I wouldn't choose to be a subject of gossip. Conversely, I'm completely open about my homosexuality – I'm lucky enough to live in a society where anyone reacting negatively would find themselves to be the outcast. So I'm 'out' as gay to everyone, but 'out' as a furry only to a few very close friends. Such compromises are a normal and necessary part of living in a social world.

I think it's an important skill to give the impression of 'fitting in', without compromising those things that are internally important. As Kurt Vonnegut said in *Mother Night*: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." It's not always an easy balance, although sometimes it's just a matter of keeping your stuffed zebra in your luggage.

Just as importantly, we can notice and moderate our own natural negative reaction to outsiders. We can't change our subconscious reaction, but we can control what we say and how we act. It's the first step towards a more tolerant and accepting world.

5.4   A Bitch About Furry

Tolerance is one of the great features of the furry community.

We need to be tolerant. Our community contains a lot of people who are sometimes marginalized in general society: gays, transsexuals, zoophiles, kinksters, even geeks.

This tolerance is sometimes positive acceptance, but it's often simply neutral, the absence of rejection. Furry behaviour is often more tolerant than general society simply through such tacit acceptance. This is clearly demonstrated by the language we use, especially online where less direct methods of communication are less significant. Put simply, intolerant or offensive language is not appropriate in furry spaces.

There is one significant exception: women. Some furries, especially online, use sexist language. Worse, it's being ignored, perhaps tacitly accepted, which fosters an environment which is unwelcoming towards women. Furry culture might reasonably be considered a sexist one.

To clarify: I do not think that furries are sexist. But I do think sexist language is common within furry.

To start with, I'd like to compare sexist language with other offensive terms:

1. Faggot

   - It is a homophobic term, largely because of the inherent implication that being gay makes you less of a person.

   - It has aggressive, confrontational connotations that suggests gay men are not welcome.

   - Once commonly used, it has fallen from favour through the indirect forces of political correctness.

   - Anyone using the word 'faggot' in a furry space can expect to be shouted down.

2. Nigger

   - It is a racist term, largely because of the inherent implication that being black makes you less of a person.

   - It has aggressive, confrontational connotations that suggests black people are not welcome.

   - Once commonly used, it has fallen from favour through the indirect forces of political correctness.

   - Anyone using the word 'nigger' in a furry space can expect to be shouted down.

3. Bitch

- It is a sexist term, largely because of the inherent implication that being female makes you less of a person.

- It has aggressive, confrontational connotations that suggests women are not welcome.

- Once commonly used, it has fallen from favour through the indirect forces of political correctness.

- Yet 'bitch' is fairly common in furry circles.

A quick semantic aside: 'bitch' can refer to a female dog. This makes it an appropriate term under some circumstances, much in the same way that a sheep might be referred to as a ewe. This usage is not relevant to the use of bitch as a sexist term.

(I'll add that 'faggot' is a fairly common British word: it's a kind of meatball made from liver, lungs, heart, and stomach lining. Yum.)

I have a couple of examples of furries using 'bitch' in public forums. Both are recent.

The first is from a Flayrah comment thread, written in response to an article on a recent death in the fandom. Please note that the comment is a blunt and emotional one (not that Flayrah comment threads are typically known for their dispassionate nuance), however that's not my focus.

41-bitch1

Tim's comments are directed towards the driver of a car involved in a fatal accident. She survived. The comment is angry, then becomes offensive with the sexist language exacta: 'bitch' and 'cunt'. There two words suggest that Tim believes the driver's gender is relevant, and perhaps partially to blame.

Tim's terminology suggests that he is angered by the driver's gender as much as by the accident itself. Many women reading his comment will have felt that anger directed towards them, by association.

Nobody comments on Tim's sexist language, although he does get reprimanded for being generally unreasonable: someone steps into to call him a 'stupid asshole', at which point a moderate intervenes.

(I've edited some intervening comments in the thread for clarity: you can see the full exchange here.)

To keep this in context, this is a nothing but a comment thread on an emotive topic, no more than poorly-thought-out expressions of anger and impotent frustration. However I think it's instructive that Tim's sexist language was ignored while the namecalling wasn't. Consider if Tim had used homophobic language, something the furry community doesn't tolerate: if the driver of the car
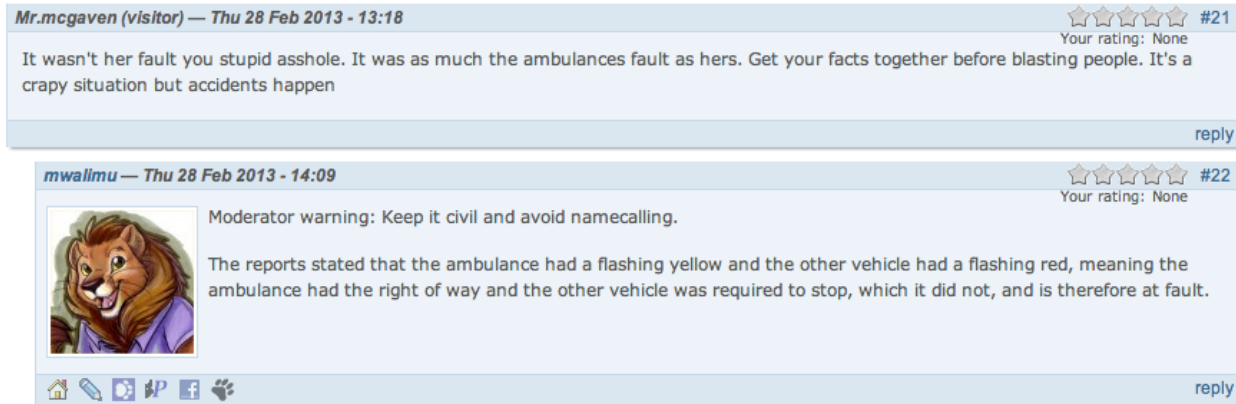
Figure 5.3: Flayrah comments

were gay, and Tim had called him a 'faggot', his language would have been firmly corrected (and Flayrah's comment-rating system's six votes wouldn't have scored him 3/5).

My second example is a tweet sent out by a friend of mine:

> I'm met this bitch before, she snatches shit out of other customers hands and then snarls at them like a rabid dog. Fucking crazed OAP bitch
> – Sphelx Komodo (@sphelx) March 2, 2013

I asked Sphelx about his comment, and he told me that the sexist slur was at least partly deliberate ("I don't really see how [bitch] is explicitly sexist, at least anymore...I think it's been replaced with 'cunt'...I was actually going to say 'cunt' at first, but then I decided to tone it down"), but that his general intent was to express anger, not to be offensive.

Sphelx is not a fundamentally sexist person. He has used this sexist language for the same reason that many furries use it: he has not been exposed to a coherent argument explaining why it's harmful.

He's hardly Robinson Crusoe. His language is pretty typical of a visible minority in the furry community. Behaviour only changes if it is challenged, and challenged in a friendly and non-judgmental fashion, which allows the person to consider the counterargument in their own way and in their own time.

It's easy to take sides and look at such people as 'wrong', or 'bad', especially when you don't know them. But it's worth considering that the world doesn't contain many people who identify as sexist. (A common refrain is some variation of I'm not sexist, I love women, a phrase comparable to I'm not homophobic, some of my best friends are gay.) And if someone doesn't think of themselves as sexist, a direct accusation will simply provoke a defensive reaction, likely followed by a frustrating and counterproductive argument.

The issue here is not enforcement of universal goodthink, it's simply language and behaviour. A good person like Sphelx looks intolerant when he uses sexist language. If you wish to challenge someone, challenge the issuetheir language and behaviournot their thoughts or motivations.

Furries, being rather young and male and techy, get exposed to a lot of fundamentally sexist online cultures. The gaming subculture is one overt example, but there are many others. Such online communities are often informed by the so-called 'men's rights' movement.

The men's rights movement is a crude backlash against feminism. It challenges discrimination applied against men, presuming that the forces challenging discrimination against women are sufficient. Such groups are essentially the gender-based equivalent of other contrarian equality movements, using the logic that steps taken to help female/black/gay people are discriminatory in themselves, and that we should all be gender/race/sexuality blind. They are typically focussed on positive discrimination measures, or government spending on minorities: examples include women-only gyms, racial quotas, and LGBT-only support.

Concerns over such discrimination would be spot on, except for the fact that this isn't Star Trek. Discrimination towards women (and gay people, and racial minorities) exists, and action needs to be taken to reverse this discrimination.

Men's rights groups frame the problem in an us-versus-them fashion: they see feminism as an extremist movement driven to help women at the expense of men. Similarly, nationalist political groups think that there is an extreme movement to help racial minorities at the expense of the majority. And (some) religious groups think that there is an extreme movement to help homosexuals at the expense of heterosexuals. I'd argue that they are misguided but, fundamentally, they are all driven by the desire for fairness: in this way, the goal of men's rights groups and feminists is the same.

Consider a hypothetical gender quota, where an employer must hire a certain percentage of women in an otherwise male-dominated field (perhaps IT, or politics, or business). In such a field, senior management tends to be almost exclusively male, simply because of mathematics: there are far more men with experience to choose from. A general lack of women means that any new female starter will be an immediate outsider; a dearth of women in upper management means that she has limited role models.

(In comparison, it is a lot easier to be a black highschool quarterback nowadays, compared to the 1980s. An aspiring black quarterback is no longer so unusual: a black quarterback is now simply a quarterback.)

Recognizing that it is more difficult for women entering a male-dominated field (because of their outsider status and lack of role models), recruiters can choose to hire a greater proportion of women. This has two positive effects: firstly, they will be hiring women who have reached that point in spite of their inherent disadvantages; secondly, they will be creating a workplace with

more female role models, reducing and ultimately removing the problem.

This is all great, except when you're the talented male candidate who is passed over for a less capable woman. And it's easy to see the trees, ignore the wood, and conclude that the system is sexist against men. It's not.

Certainly such a system is discriminatory, and the man is being discriminated against. However this is in recognition of the discrimination against women that takes place in a less direct fashion. In an ideal world – Star Trek again – neither form of discrimination would occur, and gender politics wouldn't play any part. We don't live in such a world, but we're getting there, and positive discrimination accelerates its arrival.

Feminism isn't about the rise of women over men: it's intelligent humanism. The ways in which the world discriminates against women are subtle, complex, and ever-changing. Feminism is a reaction to that.

The furry community doesn't have much of a visible feminist element, but we should. A friendly flock of furry feminists would help us improve our collective behaviour towards our female minority. Language is one of the easiest ways that we can improve. Let's start by consigning 'bitch' to the same scrapheap as 'faggot'.

5.5   Leadership in a Decentralized Subculture

Furry as a subculture may not be "mainstream", but neither is it small. The fandom has grown by leaps and bounds over the last few decades with expanding easy access to the Internet, the proliferation of furmeets and conventions, and even just plain old word of mouth. Estimates put the current size of furry at somewhere between 20,000-50,000. This is, of course, a very rough guess based on responses to The Furry Survey and other polls out there, but even at this size, were talking about a good-sized town (Fort Collins, Colorado, where I live, has about 70,000 people living in it, and about 25,000-30,000 of them attend or are otherwise affiliated with Colorado State University, so maybe we can guess at the size of a popular American university), with one very important distinction. A city in America has a council and a mayor, and belongs to a congressional district and a county, which fit within a state, which fits within the country, which is part of several overlapping groups of nations, all of which are (currently) stuck on one world. Its as if much of our culture here comprises a series of nested centralized forms of leadership and government. Even the university analogy works similarly.

Furry as a subculture, however, is almost completely decentralized. Many of us meet up and talk on the Internet, where we share our art and ideas, but many of us do not. Many of us meet up in person at furmeets, conventions, or even unrelated events such as parades, but again, many of us do not. The whole concept that "many of us do, but many of us dont" is consistent across all of furry and can be applied to creating art, role-playing, fursuiting, or most any activity that takes place within the fandom. Given this decentralized and diverse fandom which nonetheless holds itself together, how does the concept of leadership fit in?

The word "leadership" has a formal ring to it, but can be used to describe any form of guided social interaction, however informal or unintentional. In fact, one of the primary ways in which leadership is shown within the fandom is that of small groups leading through their own interactions. This way of leading by example is often a good source for the spread of memes, ideas that pass from person to person. Its almost a type of group-think at times, as after all, were already trained to think along similar lines, given that were all generally interested in this one larger trope of animal-people. There are those with the social currency or visibility that can wind up leading these trends within the fandom in their own way, however unintentionally. Trends such as the rise in popularity of streaming artwork or Your-Character-Here commissions, or trends in the music we listen to, or even the ways in which fursuiters act (there was, for quite a while, a swishy sort of "fursuit walk" that would cause the suits tail to wag which seems to have diminished in popularity over the last year or two).

Another similar form of leadership within our community is that of incidental leadership, and this is primarily shown through the intentional promuglation of ideas, which can take place through content production or actual leadership within events such as furmeets or cons. This can occasionally be bound up in the idea of popularity (a muddied word if ever there was one), but that certainly isnt always the case. This is, I think most visible within the area of visual arts, where artists will influence styles that will persist and grow based on their popularity, such as the paintings of Blotch or the fur detail in Ruaidris art. However, this extends far beyond that, and fursuits are another place in which this is visible. A certain manufacturers fursuits may be readily picked out of a crowd, such as those made by One Fur All Studios, or certain expressions may become more and more popular, such as the "Pixar Look" or the sunken "3-D eyes" style. All of these things point to the subtle leadership that goes along with content creation, especially in a culture such as ours where its not only common but almost expected for such content to be published for the widest possible audience on sites such as Weasyl, SoFurry, and FurAffinity. Even [adjective][species] could be said to fall into this category, as it is our intent to publish our works in an easily accessible way for the widest audience, even though we have no intentional designs on leadership.

Finally, there are some instances where there are quite formally defined leadership roles, whether it be the committees running conventions, or site administrators and volunteers such as those that run FA or Wikifur. These are the instances in which the leadership aspect gets closest to actual governance, in that the board running a convention does so by having each member fill a specific role, heading their own team of volunteers, in order to accomplish a certain goal. The administration of a content-hosting website faces similar challenges, often solving them in similar ways: by delegating certain tasks to people in specific leadership roles in order to accomplish a goal, such as content moderation. These are pretty common and well established practices as well, with few systems working in different ways – Reddit is a good example of a content-hosting website that eschews leadership (for the most part) in favor of quality-voting; Discourse, a forum, works similarly, by letting users with more points do more in the way of moderation. However, these examples of con boards and site admins are very specific to their purpose and rarely escape beyond their bounds and into the wider world; though to be sure, some leaders within these roles also carry additional social status due to their roles within their domains (viz, Samuel Conway or Dragoneer).

Is this bad? Having a decentralized subculture with a fluid sense of leadership? I dont think so. Its certainly not just a furry thing, as there are countless examples (just as there are countless counter-examples) of groups of people such as ours being decentralized with a fluid leadership. However, I think that it is central to our identity as far as it can be, in such a decentralized group. How, then, does it benefit us? That is, how does this affect our forward motion with regards to change? That is a complicated sort of question to answer (given how many words it took to

ask!), but I think one worth looking into. How is it that, given our lack of a sense of centralized leadership, or even a cohesive. . . well, anything, that we have perceptible shifts in artistic styles, convention habits, or even the shared interests or our new membership.

When it comes to art, we benefit from the lack of canon, the lack of a need to utilize any particular set of characters, clothing, style, or even content to any of our visual art. In a way, that seems to give us a little too much freedom, in that "overwhelming choice" sort of way. Were nothing if not inventive, though, and I think that there has been a large increase in the amount of artists and the quality of the art produced over time despite the fact that we have no guiding canon to work within. Much the same goes for fursuits, and this is helped out even further by the fact that many of the techniques and standards are being created out of whole cloth by the makers within the fandom. Not just the makers, either, as fursuit performance has changed in its own right over time. Of course, writing benefits from this as well, given the additional challenge of creating well-written furry works that are truly pertinent and not just incidental – that is, not just a story where the characters happen to be furries; something which has been accomplished in increasingly wonderful variety over the years.

Its not just content creating that has changed, though, but our styles of personal interaction, both online and off. The ideas of characters have shifted in prominence due to the shift in online interaction from that of the more purely art-based worlds of Yerf! and VCL, to the mix of art- and social-based worlds of FA, SoFurry, and Weasyl, to the mostly social networks of Twitter and the like. These are, of course, generalizations, and certainly applicable outside of furry as the Internet matures, but given how much of the fandom does take place online as well as how many of us fit into the "early adopters" category, its certainly affected us as well. The same could be said for offline interaction, as the common and socially acceptable behaviors at conventions (two things which dont always overlap). What is generally recognized as a proper con-going attitude has changed with the increased prevalence of conventions around the world and on just about any given weekend.

There is a constant stream of new members to the subculture as more and more people find furry through the Internet, through friends, or just invent it independently on their own. For those who find it through others, however, they are influenced immediately by their first impression, gained from their acquaintance with someone experiencing the whole of furry at a certain point in time. As these new folks join the fandom, they also help steer it by adding weight to whatever drew them to the fandom in the first place, and I think that this accounts for some of the ways in which our culture grows. If you were to find the fandom through, say, an artist, and thought of furry primarily as a group of individuals who put prime importance on art, then that might be your defining furry aspect. This is how it was for myself, and it took me nearly ten years to really even understand the whole fursuiting thing and why it was even a big deal. This sort of bias helps

to reinforce and further some of the aspects of our subculture. Sure, "new talent" is joining the fandom, but so to is someone interested in a certain aspect of it, adding their own weight and input to that area. We dont move forward in the same direction all at once.

In reality, this is a large part of what furry is all about for a lot of its constituents: the fact that the fandom is decentralized allows one to make their own way, but we are not without social direction, given our guiding interest in anthropomorphics and animals. It runs counter to enough of what we face in day to day life that its refreshing in a way, for a good number of us, to be a part of something that doesnt quite follow the same hierarchical strictures of so much of the rest of society. Its a place where anyone can be in a leadership role without necessarily needing to be a leader. Talking with others, producing content, or even acting in a governing position of something such as a con or website are all things that we can do here that, in their own way, wind up giving back to our subculture and helping make it what it is.

5.6   My Little MLP Adventure: Prologue

My Little Pony has become a visible part of the furry community in the last few years. Since 2010, when the TV series was rebooted by Hasbro and Lauren Faust, ponies are everywhere. Its not just that theyre easy to draw (although Im sure that helps), they are popular to the point of ubiquitousness online and at conventions. They have become an important feature of furrys cultural wallpaper. And they are, of course, anthropomorphic too.

And yet *MLP* is clearly a childrens cartoon.

So why is it loved by so many intelligent and thoughtful furries? Why has *MLP* joined the likes of The Lion King as a furry touchstone?

Im going to try to find out.

Fortunately I am friends with one of the great furry pony-lovers, a UK furry called Artax. Artax is one of the founders and an administrator of a popular *MLP* forum at www.canterlot.com (4,900 members, 286,000 posts), as well as being a longtime pony geek. I asked him how a pony-sceptic should make a virgin approach to all thing M, L, and equine.

Artax is my Dr Pony, and he has prescribed me an *MLP* marathon: were going to sit down and watch as much *MLP* as I can stand, starting with Season One Episode One.

I am filled with curiosity and terror.

The ponies, you see, are a bit personal for me. As a horse furry, I identify with my equine self as a source of quiet personal strength, physical and mental. The horse is the foundation of my identity; its what makes me a furry. Popular perception of the ponies undermines the formerly staid horse archetype. People find out that Im a horse and they dont think Im an impressive equine: they ask about my cutie mark.

Now you might find this all to be hilarious. But its taken some adjustment on my part. Its as if I met a dragon furry, and I went on to imagine a pastel Baby Yoshi. This would be at odds with the intimidating expression of outsiderhood presumably intended by my fantastical friend.

Even before the new series of *MLP* starting taking over my world, furry friends would poke fun at me by harking back to the ponies of the 1980s. They did so because they, correctly, sensed that it contradicted my relationship with the horse. And, in the manner of friends sensing a good-natured but genuine weakness, proceeded to satirize me as a pony at every opportunity. I had no choice but to grin and bear it.

My tormentor-in-chief has predictably become a modern-day pony-lover. She was all too happy to draw JM as a pony for this article (you can see more of Rainbirds pony art here):

MLP is a childrens TV show, and I rarely choose to consume media created for children.

Figure 5.4: Pony JM. According to Rainbird, Ponified JM stands for Juicy Mac, a bizarre moniker inspired either by a type of apple or the fact that I was an early iPod adopter. I do not endorse this name.

My cultural interests generally veer towards the highbrow: I subscribe to literary magazines; I read good quality fiction; I sometimes watch ponderous European cinema. And I know that this can make me seem hopelessly pretentious.

But Im not snobbish about it. I dont think less of people who prefer their media to be lowbrow, be that *Harry Potter* or *Transformers*. If anything, Im worried about being subject to a kind of reverse snobbery, where I might be made to feel ashamed for my interests. To quote Thomas Pynchon: "Except for maybe Brainy Smurf, its hard to imagine anybody these days wanting to be called a literary intellectual."

Im not going to apologise for choosing to consume media created for adults. Im equally wont suggest that there is anything wrong with consumption of media created for children. My preference is personal, and I dont think that people who love the lowbrow are any lesser in intelligence, or any other supposed measure of the value of a human being.

I dont have any specific objection to animation or childrens TV, except to say that I often find it, well, childish. There is a scene in *Life Of Pi* (the novel, I havent seen the film) where our castaway,

in desperate hunger, tries to eat his own faeces. His plight is such that he doesnt register the taste, he simply learns that it contains no sustenance. I feel much the same way about childrens TV, from *Barney the Dinosaur* through to *Family Guy*.

And so the prospect of a day dedicated to *My Little Pony* fills me with terror. I understand that the show is set in a pony-only universe, and that the characters (who have names like Rainbow Dash) go about and have adventures. Everything is going to be colourful and high-contrast and jolly, which sounds to me like a kind of longform Nyan Cat.

Fear.

But I am curious too, and that curiosity comes from the rather amazing culture that has sprung up around *MLP*. Artax, like many of my pony-loving friends, is an intelligent and grounded guy. I trust that his love for the show must come from something more worthwhile and nuanced than its physical aesthetics.

Perhaps there is an undercurrent of Ghibli-style magic, where an emotional thread lurks below the fantastical creations? Maybe there is a clue in the shows subtitle, and that the show explores how friendship creates something special, magical about life? (Please, please please please, dont tell me that *actual* friendship in the pony universe is *actually* magic. Please please.) Im all for well-told morality tales that reinforce the value of friendship, one of lifes true joys.

There are some obviously positive sides to the show too. Its rather excellent that the main characters are exclusively female (or close to it), and that they are embraced by a diverse audience. It makes for a refreshing change, especially given that popular cartoon shows among furries are often contemptible bro-fests, where women are treated as if they are an alien species (sometimes literally). *MLP* is a breath of fresh air among the likes of *Adventure Time*, *Regular Show*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, *Phineas & Ferb*, et al ad nauseum.

Also, I love the pony fandoms embrace of the so-bad-its-good neologism brony. Brony is a great term, enthusiastically ludicrous, and neatly co-opts a masculine word base to become at least partly gender-neutral. Its a miracle born of the unlikely coupling of 4chan-style snarkiness and political correctness.

When I ask my brony friends about *MLP*, I get a range of responses. Some feel that its genuinely great TV, some seem to enjoy it as a guilty pleasure, others have referred to it as audio-visual valium. This makes it sound vaguely like the glacial Koyaanisqatsi, a film thatat least in conceptseems like the artistic polar opposite of *MLP* (except perhaps in the stoner classic category). Whatever the truth, such descriptions have piqued my curiosity.

So Im approaching my ponyfest with an open mind, without setting my expectations too high. Artax has suggested that I prepare by bringing a stuffed animal and a very large quantity of vodka. So I should end up with a warm glow one way or the other. Ive even infused my vodka with beetroot to give it an appropriately pink hue.

Wish me luck. I shall report my results next week.

Chapter 6

April

6.1   My Little MLP Adventure: Verdict

I don't normally watch children's cartoons.

Yet I sat down and watched several hours of *My Little Pony*, in an attempt to understand why it has become so visible within the furry community. Here is what I discovered.

I learned that *My Little Pony* is a cartoon aimed at an audience of young girls. It's very well made: high production values, good animation, talented voice acting, robust and logical stories. That's basically all it is.

Except that it has gained a huge adult following, including a high proportion of furries. The adult fans are largely male, young, and geeky; a demographic that not coincidentally describes a big swathe of the furry population.

I asked a few pony lovers why *MLP* is so popular. I received responses like *'the brony community is great'*; or, *'because MLP has critical mass online, so you can't avoid it'*; or, *'because it's so childish that people like to make fun of it'*. All of these arguments may be true but they require there to be a large pre-existing *MLP* audience: none of them explain why so many people started – and kept – watching and caring in the first place.

The appeal of *MLP* can be inferred by looking at its audience: girls, and young geeky men (with some exceptions). *MLP* is a big deal because its art style and subject matter make it easy for people to identify with the characters. *MLP* appeals to people who are developing empathy.

Allow me to explain.

1. They Have Big Eyes

The ponies have big eyes: big, big eyes. Their heads are the size of their bodies; their eyes take up half their heads.

We humans are social beings. Most of our communication takes place through body language, especially facial expressions. We see faces in inanimate objects all the time: in sand dunes on Mars, or a slice of toast.

The ability to infer human faces from little visual information is an evolved human trait, akin to the way zebras identify close family members by stripe patterns.

Eyes are especially important. For example, disembodied pictures of eyes, presented with no context, have been shown to have significant effects on behaviour. One study showed that pictures of eyes caused people to triple their voluntary donation for a cup of coffee, compared with pictures of flowers (ref); another found that posters of eyes in a cafeteria halved littering incidents, compared with pictures of flowers (ref).
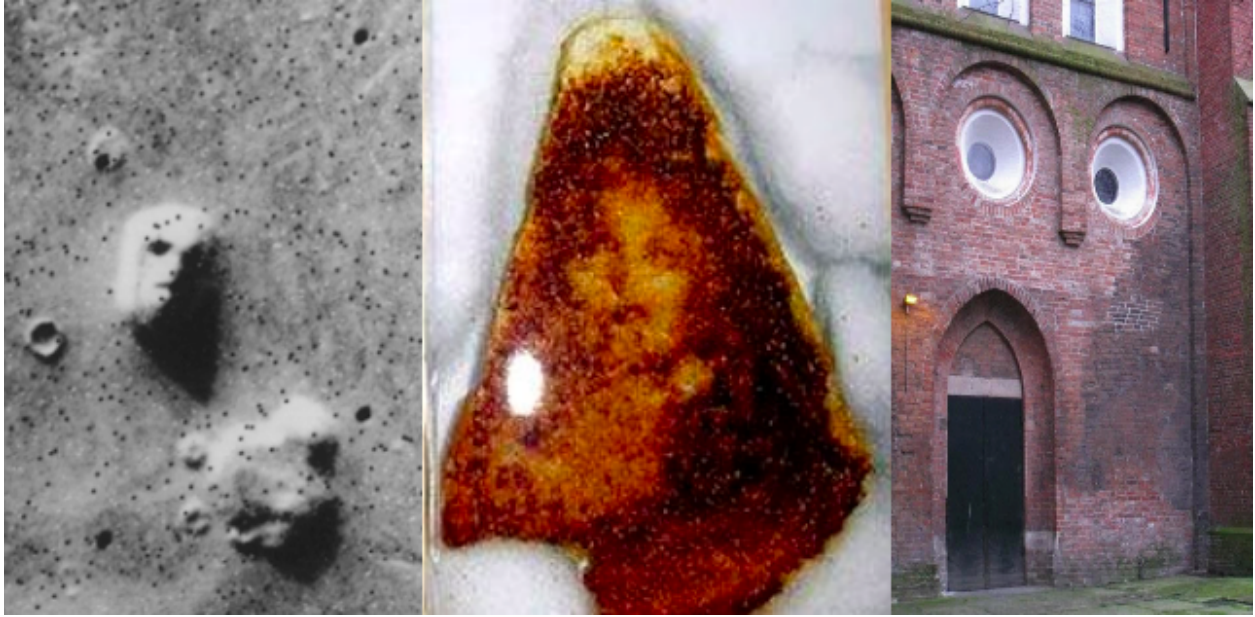
Figure 6.1: Faces in inanimate objects: sand dunes on mars; the Virgin Mary on toast; a building.

Service industry workers relying on tips would be well advised to sketch a smiley face on each customer's bill.

The ponies have huge eyes, and these eyes make it clear what they are thinking. This is narratively elegant – we don't need everything spelt out – and it makes us feel like we understand the pony. This is empathy, and it's why *MLP* is so engaging. Cartoons in general provoke a similar feeling, but *MLP* is more effective due to the huge, expressive, well animated, and well directed eyes.

It helps that the characters are female too, because

2. The Idea of 'Masculinity' is Kinda Dumb

The gender of the ponies is relevant, especially for the original target audience. Girls watching *MLP* can identify with the characters, and engage in play as an imaginary participant in the pony universe.

It's also relevant for the unintended audience – the young men – because of the state of masculinity in the 21st century. To be masculine, traditionally, was to be a force of change of the world, to be a creator. This has changed, and being masculine is now about being a detached observer of society, a trait that correlates with cynicism, sarcasm, and snarkiness. This can be (and often is) intelligent and worthwhile, but it's not healthy. It creates a world where men are driven away from participation, because participation can lead to failure, and failure breaks the detached observer
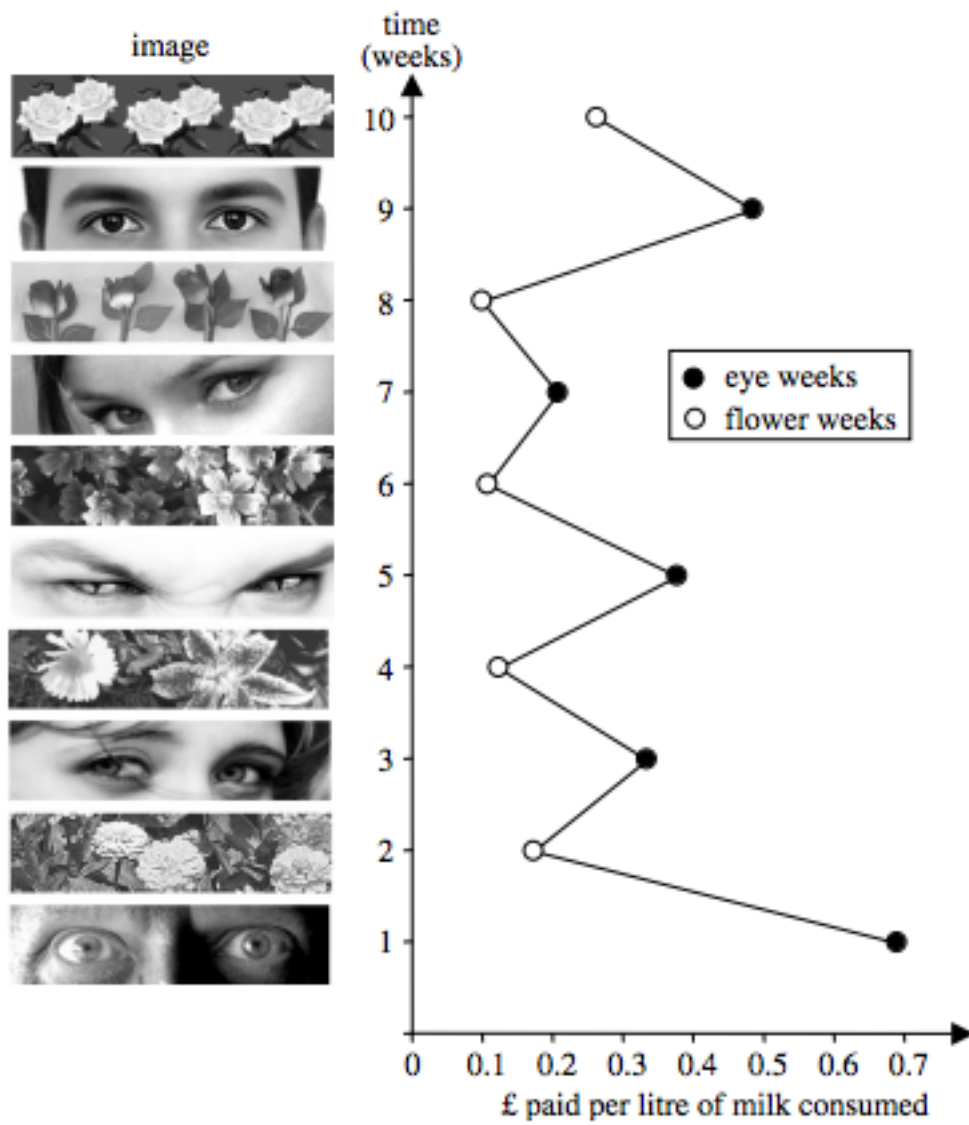
Figure 6.2: Eyes.

facade. (The only other option is to be a flawless hero, fine for cartoons.)

The female characters of *MLP* can explore friendship and creation without a requirement to be heroic or detached: they can 'have adventures' and succeed or fail on their own terms. A male version of *MLP* couldn't do that, and still ring true.

As an aside, it's nice to see that the gender of the characters isn't relevant to the male viewership. Women are simply portrayed as the norm in the context of the pony universe, and that's okay.

So beyond its core audience, *MLP* attracts

3. Geeks with High IQs

People with maturing social skills may find empathetic experiences to be rare. This is common among intelligent male geeks because:

- Men tend to mature socially more slowly than women.

- Geeks may use their intelligence as a crutch to manage social situations, relying on their analytical skills rather than their developing emotional skills.

Such geeks may prefer to socialize where interpretation of subtle body language is less important: perhaps online, or otherwise where behaviour is constrained by rules (stereotypically over a game of Dungeons & Dragons or Magic: The Gathering).

People with limited empathic skills will often find social situations to be stressful and exhausting. If you are relying on an analytical brain in a social situation (rather than an empathic brain), it requires a lot of concentration, especially if there are more than a few people present. Geeks often find socializing stressful, and will sometimes incorrectly misdiagnose themselves as being introverted, or having mild autism. They're not: they are just lower in empathy than most people, something that will grow given time.

#

My Little Pony, then, is going to meet an unconscious emotional need for many young men: the need for empathy. Young and geeky men will tend to find *MLP* very engaging, as they will be able to easily understand and empathize with the characters.

And if some of the fans are geeky, a subset of them are going to hyperfocus on the show, like Trekkies or any other geeky fandom. These hyperfocussed geeks make up *MLP*'s committed and intense following of bronies.

For the rest for us, *MLP* is engaging and easy to follow. We can 'see' what is going on inside the heads of the main characters – eyes being the windows of the soul – so the show is pleasing

and familiar. It's a relaxing viewing experience, almost hypnotic. As an experiment, my fellow viewers and I watched for a while with no sound, and we were able to follow the story with no apparent loss of fidelity.

For all its value, *MLP* is not high art. The humour is childish slapstick, a pre-teen version of Ow My Balls. The characters are simply drawn and simply motivated. The morals of the show are relentlessly, mind-numbingly positive. As an adjunct to our no-sound experiment, we also tried looking away so we were only exposed to the soundtrack: the script, the songs, and the foley artistry are nauseating, pandering, moronic. Like America's Funniest Home Videos without the videos, but less fun.

Even with its limitations, the resonance of *MLP* with many members of the furry community is genuine and valuable. I suspect that its influence on furry culture will grow: like The Lion King or Robin Hood, *MLP* will be a gateway to furry for many people. The *MLP* fandom is innately limited by its subject, and many pony-fans will find the furry community to be an environment that allows them to grow beyond the constraints of the *MLP* universe. Pony lovers will easily fit into the furry world, a world which allows them to explore their connection with anthropomorphic animals on their own terms. As I've written in previous articles for [adjective][species], furry is a community that can help personal growth and maturation.

Such opportunities for personal growth will be greatest for younger *MLP* fans. Typically, people reach emotional maturity at about age 30, although this isn't a hard limit.

I would argue that older fandom geeks, and they exist in any fandom, are limited people. They have failed to develop broader emotional skills that would allow them to look outside of their own interests and into the wider world. Such people limit their intake of culture to a small number of simple artefacts (*MLP*, Star Trek, whathaveyou) and are prone to hyperfocus on the minutiae of that culture. This doesn't make them bad – such people are often great servants to their fandom – but they tend not to be well-rounded people.

There are broader horizons out there. Most geeky young men will fit the stereotype of the high school nerd who turns out to be the hunk at the 15-year reunion. Geeky young men remain intelligent and capable human beings, gaining empathetic skills later in life. They grow and shed their social awkwardness, learning to fit in without compromising their identity. The 'sexy geek' is a well known phenomenon, to the point that fashion houses try to package and sell the 'geek chic' formula. More simply, furries can take a look around and observe that the older members of the group are often confident, happy, and sexy.

Furry provides an environment for such growth. We're diverse. We can engage with cultures like *MLP* without being defined by them. We can equally decide that *MLP* isn't relevant to our personal interests and look elsewhere. This is what's great about our community: we create our own culture. Many *MLP* fans will discover furry over the coming years, and learn such joys.

6.2   The [adjective][species] My Little Pony Cocktail

Recently I spent an afternoon watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, in an attempt to understand why ponies have become so visible in the furry community.

Criticising the show brought one expected reaction: MLP devotees thought I was unreasonably negative and dismissive of the shows qualities. But the fact is, I had a blast: the show is charming. Plus I was drunk.

In that spirit, I am proud to present the Official [adjective][species] My Little Pony Cocktail: Vodka is Magic. (Alternate subtitle: The Party Cannon.)

Its bright pink, sweet without being saccharine, and will put you at peace with the world. This recipe is enough to get one person very drunk.

Figure 6.3: Vodka is magic.

- 500 mL (about 15 fl oz) beetroot-infused vodka

- 100 mL (3 fl oz) sweet white vermouth, perhaps Martini Bianco

- juice and peel of 1/2 lemon

- 1 tablespoon sugar

Directions: Shake over lots of ice until the sugar has dissolved. Strain out the lemon peel and serve, perhaps with another block of ice. Commence *MLP:FiM* viewing marathon.

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Youll need to make your own beetroot vodka. Its easy, and thrifty: the infusion process will mellow cheap vodka into something perfectly drinkable.

First, cook one medium beetroot: the easiest way is to wrap a raw beetroot in aluminium foil and pop it into a moderate oven (160 °C / 320 °F) for an hour or two, until its tender (timing isnt critical). Slip the skin off under cold running water.

You may be able to buy pre-cooked beetroot, sometimes sold in vacuum packs. Do not use pickled beetroot from a tin. That would be bad.

Slice your beetroot, add it to a bowl or a jar, and pour your vodka over the top. Cover it with an airtight lid (cling film is fine). Leave it to infuse at room temperature for a couple of days. Again, timing isnt critical: anything from a few hours to a week will be fine.

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Vodka is Magic will announce itself with an incongruous whiff of beetroot, and a bracingly strong first sip. From there, its warming and comforting.

You might serve Vodka is Magic in a martini glass, but its not a martini. Its more a sister drink to the Cosmopolitan, stronger and less sour but equally appropriate for time spent in the company of pastel equines with ludicrous manes.

Happy drinking.

6.3   Appropriation in Furry

There are a lot of ways to think about furry. Tons and tons. It's a bit confusing at times, trying to sort out how best to talk about what we are and how we fit together as a subculture. Even the choice of the word "subculture" is loaded with its own meaning, just as is the word "fandom". Both imply certain ways of thinking about how furry works. It's a bit confusing, but, well, it's certainly served us well here at [a][s]: we've got plenty to write about, after all.

One more way of thinking about furry is to think of it as appropriation – or, rather, a series of appropriations – that help provide something of a common core to our being a relatively coherent group. Appropriation is a big and complicated word, and there are several connotations attached to it that I'll get into closer to the end of the article, but first, I'd like to explore furry through this lens and see what can be gleaned from thinking of ourselves in this light.

One of the easiest forms of appropriation to see is commercial appropriation. Commercial appropriation is what happens when elements of commercial products are adopted by people in a way not necessarily intended by the producers of that commercial content. In a way, this is how many fandoms work: a producer will create and release content of some type intended (insomuch as intent matters) for entertainment or something similar, and a group of people will appropriate that content or object as part of their identities. With as loose of a group as furry is, it's not surprising that commercial appropriations within the fandom happen often. Watching something such as Balto, The Lion King, My Little Pony, or Sonic The Hedgehog while holding in your mind this affinity for anthropomorphism, it's easy to see why, too. This goes beyond simply creating TLK or MLP characters, too, but also in adopting and creating things within the newly formed fandom (or sub-fandom, in our case, as I'm speaking specifically of those who identify both with furry and also this appropriated creation). Even those who do not overtly participate in this appropriation can subtly add to it through their acknowledgement and interaction with those aspects of the fandom; JM's recent articles on My Little Pony fall along those lines, in their own way.

Another form of appropriation that crops up within our subculture is that of cultural appropriation. One of the ways in which this crops up is through appropriation of spiritual or the adoption of ideas central to spiritual practices within a non-spiritual context. This can happen both overtly and subtly. Overtly, I've seen quite a bit of shamanistic art and design going into certain characters, reflecting north and central American native culture. To be more specific, a number of coyotes that I've met of late have talked of Coyote, a spiritual persona or even deity of many Native American tribes. Beyond these obvious connections, however, there are more subtle, subconscious appropriations that fit more neatly within those of us who reside firmly within Western culture. It's

not uncommon to see clever foxes and coyotes, or smug, aloof cats, or even the concept of lone wolves. This isn't universal by any stretch, but it does show a reflection of western society's collective mythology adopted in a very literal sense within our anthropomorphic inclinations.

There are other ways to think of cultural appropriation, as well. We adopt and adapt widely from the culture around us, much of which comes from the consumer culture of the western world, but some of which is new, and taken eagerly from what we know and consume. For instance, the fandom surrounding the My Little Pony franchise has mingled with the furry subculture within the last few years, mixing stylistically and idealistically in both directions. There are more subtle indications of cultural appropriation. For example, some of the participants of FurCast (hey guys!) have argued that there are aspects of hermaphroditic characters furry fandom that have appropriated portions of the trans* experience into their characters and identities (though see the note on this below).

Even the idea driving furry itself, or at least a seeming majority of it, is one of appropriation: appropriating characteristics of animals and applying them to oneself in ways extending beyond their original "purpose". Adopting ears is one thing, but appropriating a keen sense of hearing in role-play can indicate an entirely new purpose, and the same applies to scent, pack behavior, hierarchies, or even species specific talents, such as tracking, alertness, or affinity for shinies.

Appropriation is a complicated subject (as many things with their own Wikipedia disambiguation page tend to be), and it should be noted that there are a lot of different ways of thinking about the topic, and each has their own connotation to go along with it. The ideas of cultural and spiritual appropriation, for instance, are often viewed in a negative light. It's not just that one is "stealing" or "not doing it right" by not participating in toto, so much as, by attempting to maintain one's cultural identity, having an external party appropriate a portion of that identity for their own means can be seen as weakening the worth of the whole. On the other side, many disagree with this, especially when it comes to the concepts of commercial and social appropriation, as the current way of thinking is nothing if not cynical: by appropriating portions of art and commercial products, we are creating something new, something beyond, something worthier. I think that this is a lot of what drives fandoms in the current day and age. By taking something that was intended for a single, often financially oriented, purpose and making it a portion of our identities, we are giving it a life of its own as breathed by its more spiritual participants. And sometimes, it's simply standing on the shoulders of giants: if we have seen further, then that is often the reason.

None of this changes the fact that, when we take a step back and look at it from a far, a lot of the core of our culture is based on appropriation, good or bad. We've built ourselves up out of what we were given, in a way, and that helps to provide us with a set of ideas that many of us hold as part and partial to both our identity and also what we expect from others within the fandom, whether they're producing things for us to consume (as in expectations in art, literature,

and so on), or interacting with us as fellow members (as in social expectations adopted or character attributes appropriated). So much of furry is appropriated from elsewhere, though it's the way we put it together and make it work that makes us who and what we are.

In the end, as with many topics as far reaching and variegated as this, it's hard to tell whether or not this is a good thing for the fandom or not. It certainly applies, at least to some extent – after all, we are not a culture built totally on appropriation: all it takes is a glance at our own readily accessible productions. Even the examples that I've tried to look into, with my own limited scope, must be taken on an individual basis It has its positive and negative connotations, and it can be seen as both adding to and hindering our constructive growth as a subculture. All that said, though, I stand by what I stated earlier in that taking a step back and looking at furry as a whole in all these different ways can help us understand the ways in which we do grow, constructive or otherwise. By understanding that there are those whose productions we are appropriating for ourselves, or whose societies whose cultures we are adopting bits and pieces of, we can understand how we have gotten where we are now, and by looking at the things we are doing at this moment, we can help see where we might wind up in days to come.

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Note: I know that I really shouldn't get into this too much here so as not to derail the article too much, but I do feel that this comment is worth explaining further. The trans* community, of which I'd consider myself a part, is really quite new, and even much of the underlying theory of gender goes back only a century at most (though there were certainly descriptions of both before, it is important recognize the start of a cohesive idea or set of ideas, however). Those that I've talked to, along with myself, don't agree one hundred percent that those who have hermaphroditic characters are appropriating portions of the trans* or intersex experience into a lifestyle or role-play so much as exploring non-normative gender as expressed though a character's biological sex, but that hardly implies universal agreement, and there are certainly aspects of fantasy, particularly sexual fantasy, that can impinge uncomfortably on reality for many, many individuals. However, this is a very large topic, and [a][s] may not the place to explore it outside its own article, and so I'll leave it be, with the warning that this is bigger than it might appear on the surface.

6.4   Furry Impressions

There are always key moments in any human relationship, whether said relationship is rooted in business, romance, politics, or pretty much anything else. When I was an adolescent, one of the most current memes in society was that a person's first impression of someone or something was the most crucial moment of all. While of course I can't recall all this in encyclopedic detail, at that time the market was flooded with books on how to improve your first impression, and said books were filled with charts "proving" just how vitally important this was to success in life's endeavors. The principle was even carried over into academicskids were given "fun math" to do on their first day in school, to improve that vital initial impression. I recall this pretty well because, being a teen at the time, it provided me with my first-impression of the self-help book industry and, well…We all know how lasting a first impression can be, no?

At any rate, it's inevitable that furs coming into the fandom tend to undergo a whole series of "firsts". One of these, which was often life-changingly profound to people of my own age, was the first discovery that there were other people as crazily in love with anthropomorphic art and stories and costumes and such as we were. Perhaps the power of this moment has lessened with time; in my own case I discovered the fandom at an age in excess of 35 because of the simple fact that until then there was no Internet access where I live. After over three decades of isolation, well…I was practically turning somersaults with joy! I was also even more socially awkward than I am now and had no idea whatsoever how to handle myself online at all, much less among furs. A handful of individuals (to whom I remain eternally grateful) helped me along, were patient when I wrote them too-long and too-personal e-mails, etc. These people formed my first impression of the fandom; had they brushed me off it would've just about broken me.

My next "first" was meeting other furs in person. In my case I met two on the same night. It was their first time too, and clearly we were more than a little scared of each other. But the event was a success overall, mostly because we all worked at making it so. More happy memories, more growth as a fur.

After that, there was really only one "first" left, and that was my first furmeet. It happened to be MephitI'm not certain but I think it was #3 (counting the infamous pizza party as #1). That experience really pushed my limits, but it also made me certain that I wanted to be part of this fandom in the long term.

While I didn't sit down to write an autobiographymy original planned title was "Going to your First Furcon"the more I remembered my early days as a fur. Which in turn reminded me of how tremendously grateful I am to those who held my hand, who listened to me prattle, who put up with my poor social skills and generally made me fit to become part of this wonderful society.

I've always tried to remember how much I owe these folkssome of whom I'd be embarrassed to meet todayand have attempted to "pay it forward" by taking the time to chat with newcomers to the irc channel I frequent and actively try to get to know lost-looking people wandering around the corridors at cons. Because they are me, you seeme as I was, and me as I'd have remained had I decided that I couldn't possibly fit in with the furry crowd and ought to go off and be alone again. Sure, sometimes it backfiresthe chemistry can't always be right. But I try to help, and it's through my efforts that I honor those who helped me.

So, here's my challenge to both of the readers who I expect will still be with me at this point in the article. . .

Remember that you too once wandered the chatrooms and convention halls as an awkward misfit, if only because you were a teenager and all teens are awkward misfits. Remember that you were too shy to hug the fursuiter, and sat and ate your lunch all by yourself because no one sat down at your table with you. Remember that its entirely possible to be lonely in a crowd; indeed, it's inevitable until someone lets you in and makes you part of the crowd. Remember that you sat in the panel afraid to raise your hand and ask what you really wanted to know. And as you remember these things and see them reflected in the eyes of a stranger standing by himself in a corridor and looking a little dazed, remember that he's forming his first impressions of our fandom. His most powerful impressions, in fact. The ones that he'll carry with him and judge us by forevermore.

I was damned lucky to get such a wonderful first impression of furdom. Or perhaps notas I said, numerous individuals went far out of their way on my behalf. But at every furmeet and convention you ever go to, there are first impressions being formed all around you at every moment of every hour. I do my best to make them good ones, as I've said, as much as anything in an effort to honor those who did the same for me.

Do you owe the fandom any less than I do?

6.5   Furry Internationalism

Furry is a genuinely international phenomenon. There was a time when furry might have been accused of being an English-speaking Caucasian phenomenon, but those times are long gone.

Here at [adjective][species] Zik has put together a review of Furry Cons of the World, which remains the best single demonstration of furry's worldwide spread. Despite its length, it's not a comprehensive list, with some oversights and some new cons appearing in the year since Zik's article was published.

One new con is based in the city where I grew up: Perth, Australia. FurWAG will be held at the Rendezvous Studio Hotel on October 4-6, 2013 (www.furwag.com.au/), a con that has some claim to being the first in South-East Asia.

Perhaps that's a bit of a stretch: Australia is hardly most people's idea of an Asian nation. However Perth is geographically closer to Indonesia than any other Australian city, and is in the same time zone as Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Beijing. For those living in South-East Asian nations, loosely collected under the AnthroAsia banner (www.anthroasia.com/), I expect that FurWAG will become a regular pilgrimage.

I know quite a few of the AnthroAsia folk, and I can think of no better example of furry's spread into culturally diverse parts of the world. Furs from the region tend to travel to Singapore for local meetups, recently including a visit by Japanese furries.

It's a similar story in South America and in Europe, home of the standard-bearer for furry internationalism, Eurofurence. The 18th Eurofurence, last year, saw people travel from 34 different nations, a record I'm sure they will handily beat in 2013.

Furry is an international community that pays little notice to the borders that divide us. Our community is participating in one of the great upheavals of the 21st century, an upheaval in its early stages: the loss of true national identity.

Country borders are becoming arbitrary. Nobody thinks that there is anything fundamentally different between two people born one mile either side of the USA-Canada border. Few people raised in Alsace will feel either completely French or completely German. The idea that each person 'belongs' to a certain country, that it is a fundamental part of their identity, is becoming an antiquated notion. People who identify themselves by their American state or British county already seem old-fashioned or quaint; statements of national identity will become similarly anachronistic as the world becomes more interconnected.

A loss of national identity is, I think, a good thing. We become less prone to broadly stereotyping foreign groups, generalizations that can be insulting, reductive, or racist. Our natural suspicion

towards people who are different – outsiders – is tempered, and we do a better job at treating our fellow human beings with humanity.

On the downside, some ancient cultures will be lost in this upheaval. Some of those at risk include marginalized racial groups, such as the indigenous cultures of North America and Australia; other cultures at risk include those that are fundamentally isolationist, such as religious absolutists, perhaps most obviously in the United States and the Middle East.

Those people fighting for the safeguarding of indigenous cultures, and those people fighting to protect their religious culture, are often from the opposite sides of the political fence. However their goal in this regard is the same: that some things must be protected, that these cultures represent something important that should not be lost.

It's a worthy fight but probably an unwinnable one: the world is inexorably becoming more internationalist. To borrow a phrase from the Australian culture of my childhood: the pooch may already be rooted. But while some cultures are being lost, new cultures are appearing.

For example: furry culture.

New cultures will appear as our world becomes more internationalist. These new cultures will be less based around physical proximity (and often rejection of outsiders), but based on shared interests. Technological tools such as the internet are making us closer, so we can seek out – and contribute to – those cultures we find appealing. Furries, for example, have taken the idea of anthropomorphism – an idea that has existed for a long time, arguably hundreds of centuries (as explored here in [adjective][species]), and taken it in unpredictable directions.

There are many other new cultures appearing, although not all will mature as quickly as furry. We furries are, after all, a community of early adopters.

The emergence of new cultures is one of the most exciting things about the world at the moment. I'm not going to go quite so far as to call this a Golden Age, but I believe that today's worldwide cultural change is a positive one.

In general, I think that the world is clearly changing for the better. Some will disagree with that assertion. I support my argument with a single quote:

Global life expectancy at birth, which is estimated to have risen from 47 years in 1950-1955 to 65 years in 2000-2005, is expected to keep on rising to reach 75 years in 2045-2050. (quote from UN World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision)

The internationalist drive is, I think, a great positive influence on our world. As the world becomes more internationalist, with furries (perhaps incongruously) leading the way, historical cultural rivalries will slowly fade towards irrelevance. A more connected world is a more peaceful one.

If that sounds like a bit of a stretch, consider a hypothetical war starting tomorrow. There will be furries on both sides of the conflict, and some who become caught in the middle. We will

know about this because we're interacting on Twitter, or Fur Affinity, or Weasyl, and wherever else furries socialize.

Our sympathies will be for the affected furries, regardless of whether they are a combatant or innocent victim. War in the mid-20th century was more a matter of choosing sides; this is no longer the case.

Umberto Eco, an Italian author and intellectual, made a related argument in a 1991 essay titled Reflections on War (published in this collection). Eco argues that internationalism has made traditional war 'impossible'. He notes that a nation cannot build an absolute consensus inside its own borders, and that the cause-and-effect of any war becomes obfuscated to the point that outcomes are impossible to predict. Reflections on War predicts many of the unforeseen outcomes of America's war with Iraq: a war that, whatever your feelings about it, didn't achieve the intended outcome in the intended fashion.

Furry culture pays little regard to international boundaries, an example of Eco's assertion that nations cannot be considered self-contained units. Furries love and respect one another regardless of nationality or culture. We're not blind to our differences, however these are trumped by our similarities, such as the shared furry culture. It's safe to assume that Eco didn't envisage the furry community as a great example of how 'hot' war is impossible, but our internationalist culture makes us exactly that.

A second example (and those averse to sports metaphors should skip ahead two paragraphs): the Indian Premier League, a newish cricket tournament. Before the IPL, cricket was played based on geography: state vs state, or country vs country. The IPL is a club competition that works more like soccer: players are sourced from around the globe.

In the blink of an eye – where nationality, religion, or culture doesn't define the players of an IPL team – people have learned the pointlessness of formerly bitter and hateful rivalries. White South Africans cheer black West Indians; Hindus cheer Tamils and, most notably; Indians cheer Pakistanis (although Pakistani players are technically unavailable for the IPL, there are lots of Pakistani expats: Imran Tahir, Owais Shah, Azhar Mahmood, etc).

Internationalism brings people together and makes historical flashpoints look petty and trivial. Furries are coming together in a way unimaginable a generation ago. We are exposed to a range of races and cultural backgrounds, helping us moderate any persisting short-sighted beliefs fostered by parochialism.

It's more than that too: our internationalist furry culture means that we are good rolemodels for new furries, and we provide support to the vulnerable. Consider my favourite generic example of someone unlikely to fit into his local culture: a young gay furry from a rural American community. Our young fur will meet other gay men who are happy and comfortable with their sexuality, and he will take solace that he is not so isolated after all.

The furry community opens up options, to all of us. Our internationalism offers experience we can draw upon and learn from. And we're providing the same service to others when we interact with furries from outside our own culture.

We're spreading our internationalist culture, one that comes with peace and respect as standard.

6.6 Whiskey Sour

Emotion lives out its life in poetry. It might summer in prose, it might vacation in speeches, and it may even spend a nice weekend wrapped around a pithy quip. But, in the end, emotion's country of origin is poetry. Even before we wrote stories on paper, far before we recorded everything we created in a fashion archivists scratch their heads at, there was poetry and verse.

The fandom has been slow to adopt poetry, and it's not without its reasons; too often these days culture equates verse with self-absorbed and self-diagnosed loners who attempt to pour their sadness onto the page in recursive stanzas. Are they wrong in choosing this course of release? Of course not, but these angry emo journal poets' have eclipsed the multitudinous and varied styles of poetry there are out there.

(There is, to be fair, a lot of blame to be laid on the poetry curriculum in schools, but that is a conversation for another day.)

With growing sub-communities devoted to writing verse, I'm confident there is a place for poetry in the fandom in the same way there is a place for prose, art, and fursuiting. There is no end to what poetry can accomplish, both within the constraints of meter and rhyme and without. If prose is the way by which we show others how we view the world, then poetry is the way by which we glean meaning from the world we view. A sunset is just a sunset until you can describe it as something else. Then it is much more.

Whiskey Sour

We cup our claws,
Our talons,
Our nubby, rum-soaked fingers round flimsy cups
Thrust high in praise of the bacchanal;
Of deities borne through chants whispered into bottle caps,
And gods reincarnated with too-loud laughter.

And we, members of a growing cult
That malingers like a skulking formaldehyde dream;
The clan of eternal headaches,
Of moist and sloppy lip-locks in bathrooms,
A brotherhood we did not know we had joined –
All hidden behind locked hotel room doors

Dangling signs to ward away housekeeping just one more day.

The tingling fingers of siren cocktails draw shadows on our eyes,
Their clarion songs promising personality,
Conviviality,
New and absent friends cast in the fires of a molotov.

The party floors reek of high-proof happiness by Thursday's end;
A massive, sharp-toothed plague that grips us
Like beef bourguignon with the red overflowing,
And in its powerful jaws
Forces from us a vomit of glee.

#

In my naivete, my swollen days of Massachusetts autumn,
When life was a marbled haze upon my eyes,
New to the north, new to adulthood in its bleak daylight;
It is here I was first thrust headlong into the convention scene.

The smiles of the rogues,
The shade-beings,
Frothing like the head of a fresh-poured Guinness,
With arms outstretched as great bows with no arrows.

"You're here!" they cried, they shouted!

"You've made it!"

"No more are you doomed to a life
Where what you know of us are pixel silhouettes,
Spectres and creations of fervent, bored imaginations
Illuminated to life upon LCD screens.
No more will you play the most dangerous game
With mouse cursor and hyperlink,
A man on wild safari for a beast no one has caught!"

The lobby was Kublai Khan's pleasure dome,
Husky and dense with delights:
Shrieks of absences making hearts grow fonder
And the soft hum of happy chatter.
This was the soundtrack of a grin.

And this Morphean utopia,
All swathed in furs and memetic shirts,
Laid itself before me prostrate like a lover waiting.
And somehow, despite having never charted these waters,
I spread my fingers wide, the rays of a distant star
Upon the china white body of this vast world made flesh,
Feeling blind corners and sharp elevation changes.

And in my mind, this monolithic and precise relief
Fit jigsaw-snug into the jagged-edged,
Razor-toothed pockets of the conspace –
Just like I knew it would.

#

The size of the party means you're having more fun!
Kiss the elbow of the man next to you
(Though you aimed for his lips
And your trajectory erred),
Caress the obliques of a stranger –
Any stranger! –
They know you in spirit.

We pack ourselves tighter into a four-person cubicle,
Sardines with no oil or water,
Just marinating for the main course.

We keep laughing, we writhe our bodies;
We roll our heads, unattached, through the marathon hallways,
Down the stairwells and across the pool chairs,

Colossal sound extricating itself from our maws thrown wide with venom;
Venom and veracity.

Keep laughing, you fools! This is of import! –
Don't let's talk, don't let's converse.
Imbibe, my comrades.

Imbibe!

#

Acquaintences met, acquaintences made,
And now a believer in the throes of transubstantiation
I rose from the fairgrounds,
Making careful, tiptoe steps into the elevator
As if wary of nightengale floors.

Rising, rising! like the wind through a flue,
Then left in the dim hallway of an upper floor;
A babe in the clasp of some darkened bosom.

A friendly face?
There, past the ionic columns of pizza boxes,
The tenuous styrofoam skycrapers
And sunken pagodas erected in the conquest of General Tso;
There, through the chalky dark mist, I wandered,
Unaware that this was the land of the forgotten;
This was the desert Moses lost himself in for forty years,
Or a world Euclid would have wept at the sight of.

Hand-scrawled signs on the closed doors,
Effegies of animal-men in cartoon hysterics,
Voiced by a backmask reveille –
Were they speaking?
No, they were barking; mad creatures
All scraping claws on cage bars,

Aching for an exit of this perverted zoo.

A smile across the hall –
My brethren!
They ushered me from the dark and dreary path
And into their light-filled embraces,
All hearth and home.

On the desk, a lanyard graveyard,
Piles of forgeries laid waste in private
To mingle in a flat-ironed spiderweb;
And looming over us all was the altar,
The godless instrument for impassioned debauchery;
A boozy glass harmonica.

I was handed a cup.

In downcast gaze, I saw myself in the milky mirror,
An endless pit just below the surface film.
Its jaws gaped, a chasm, an abyss,
A lion awaiting the head of its master
(And I with no whip or chair).
The drink plumed personality from its depths,
Swarthy and succulent,
Sugar and spice. . .
. . . And the hooch was quite nice.

As if I had exchanged lives with a desperate man
Lost in the Sahara, carrying a dry canteen,
Upon seeing the liquid I erupted with need
And the drink disappeared in a fit of magic.
The cup hung as a red flag upon my body,
Too obvious to notice,
Waving defeat in the cold October air.

My thoughts grew hairline fractures, fit to burst at the seams;
The cup was refilled;

And I'd've rather rinsed than repeated
But is it not unkind to turn down one's host?
The steps to a new and baffling dance snuck on through,
A sway and a hop I had hidden,
Shoved under blankets;
Sandwiched between floorboards.

I guzzled, I glutted,
I quaffed and I chugged and I drank.

#

Deaddog, deaddog,
Come out to play.
The boy's in the meadow,
The girl's in the hay.

The boy's at the toilet,
The girl's at the sink.
Deaddog, deaddog!
Just one more drink?

#

A name, a curse,
Scratched, tattooed in dismantled English,
Tight gypsy glyphs in thick-line Sharpie on cheap red plastic
As if this chalice of consumption,
This cup of infinite holding was mine forever.

But it's never quite ours forever, though;
Never just quite.
When all the rum, all the gin, all the mixers run dry
And down to the floor we descend in a daze;
When corpses of bottles are strewn on the desktops,

Under beds,
Across suitcases unpacked;
When we have constructed mass graves and catacombs to coquetting
which overflow the trash bins;
Tremendous and terrific mountains to excess
Unfit for us to scale –
More appropriate, as knackered as it is,
To set it aflame like a phantasmagoric funeral pyre,
And let acrid smoke curl through the room and asphyxiates us.

When this death waltz has begun,
We stare from the valley of drunken stupor,
Cross-eyed and infantile,
And we gurgle out our sorrows, intoning our distates,
And the once-bright laughter falls pallid and flat;
Fetal fallen angels neck-deep in Hell's detritus.

It is possible to reverse transubstantiation –
In those moments, it is possible to eat your own halo.

The spark of newness rubs away quick,
Like the silver ink on a fresh credit card.
Deep in the cavities of the room parties,
Shadowed under the awnings and eaves of hedonism
(May Dionysus his name be praised into the porcelain shrines!),
And the towering she-wolves we suckle from –
Romulus and Remus ad infinitum –
Inside these wounds we lose the virgin edges,
We claw our way into the light of day
And hiss at the sun.

I do not want to become a parody of intelligence.
I do not want this to be our brave new world
Filled with the vapor trails left by regret,
Bitterness smothered in cold flame.
I will not be baptized into the Church of the Dead Soldier:
Not by mother vodka.

Not by father whiskey.

Yet still, I raise a toast –
In a smaller, finer glass –
To friendships forged in the fandom's smithy;
A fandom sought out by outliers and outcasts –
Those without names and those with too many.
I will laugh a real laugh,
A room-filling sound that is never too loud,
Fringed with the fragile lace of mirth.

And high above us, the dirty angels of the rooms
Pray to their patron saints to let them see the afternoon.

For unlike we folk awake and alive,
They have not learned how to hide their halo
Just behind their backs –
Just out of reach from the cold and clammy hands
That still crush the plastic party cups into cadavers.

No, they have no place for their goodness,
And hide their glow in the bottoms of cocktails;
Just around the far side of the martini olives
That gaze upon them and despair.

And in that moment,
With the very eyes of their consumption cast outward?
Just smile back, take a sip,
And make it the last.

At least for the night.

Chapter 7

May

7.1 Not-So-Distant Cousins

This is a lightly-edited reprint of a column in Anthro Magazine that first appeared in Issue #14, in 2007.

Perhaps my favorite activity at conventions is having dinner with groups of friends at local eateries. Anyone who knows me well will recognize that I'm pretty fond of my chow to begin with, and to be able to share my dining experience with a (usually) mixed group of old friends and new acquaintances is, well, the highlight of my calendar. Usually, at least once during a con I'll try and round up a suitable group, and off we go for what is always a memorable time out.

One of the most remarkable such con-dinners I've had in recent years took place in Memphis, during Mephit, at the Germantown Commissary. A group of about fifteen of us of mixed ages and of varying degrees of my acquaintanceship formed a convoy and ran across town to this trendy establishment, which allegedly sold the best barbeque in town. On the way our convoy broke up and some of us were separated, causing much anxiety. The Commissary proved to be the most highly-overrated restaurant I've ever experienced; it was crowded, the servers were rude to the point of surliness, and the food was okay at best. At any other time I'd have been very unhappy with my evening.

But because of the people I was with, the experience was absolutely magic.

I don't know what it is about fen (a common slang-term for SF and other geeky-type fandom members), but within minutes of sitting down we were off and running as if we did this sort of thing every evening of our lives. I can't claim to recall everything we discussed; the conversation was much too witty, free-ranging and articulate for me to remember it all. I do know that we went from ribald jokes to the nature of the universe and back several times in the blink of an eye. It was, in other words, the kind of stimulating and intelligent conversation that I spend most of my life starved forthat most of us fen, I suspect, spend our everyday lives starved for. Certainly, it was for me rain to a desert.

At one point, while we were discussing the finer points of terraforming, a good friend of long standing who's also very interested in high-tech and has a degree from a prestigious university interrupted. "Wait a minute!" he commented. "We're furs! We're not supposed to be talking about this kind of stuff! Aren't we supposed to be debating which part of the fox is the floofiest?"

The comment got a good laugh, but it also made me think. My friend was right, in that the dinner conversation at this particular meal had a very definite SF flavor. Even more, I realized, the same was true of most of the similar dinners I've enjoyed for all these many years now. We're far more likely to discuss artificial intelligence at these affairs than vulpine floofiness, for example. And while fur-related subjects like gengineering probably get more than their share of air-time,

even these conversations wouldn't be out of place at, say, WorldCon. In other words, while the furry fandom did in fact (as near as I can tell, not having been around at the time) split off from the world of SF, there's still an awful lot of SF left in us even these many years down the road. While this may not be true of all or even most fur-fans, I do have definite preferences in mind when selecting my dinner-companions, after all, and the ability to discuss a wide variety of subjects both amicably and intelligently ranks high among themthere's certainly enough of us SF-derived types around to give the fandom a definite and recognizable flavor.

I had this brought home even more forcefully to me at Rain Furrest one year, where I (being one of the guests of honor) interacted quite a bit with the con chairman. He was strictly an SF fan, not a fur, and the local furs had drafted him to run their con because at that time no one else thought they had enough experience. He and I had a quite pleasant conversation about the differences between a furmeet and an SF con and, frankly, there weren't many. Furs consume less alcohol, as a rule, and require a little more in the way of costuming support. But all the major elements are pretty much the same, derived almost entirely from the SF cultural parent. Even much of the lingo is the same; I didn't blink when he used the term 'SMOF' (Secret Master of the Fandom), and he recognized my use of 'fen' and 'mundane' (meaning anyone other than a fen) right off. I don't recall if the terms actually came up, but if he'd told me that a mutual acquaintance had 'gafiated' (Gotten Away From It All) or 'fafiated' (been Forced Away From It All), I'd have understood him instantly. In other words, furs and SF fen share a private language.

I suppose I can understand how the split between furs and mainstream SF fans came to be. There are distinct cultural differences, and probably most furs aren't as hard-science driven as the SF fandom. Even so, there's enough of us tech-rooted types around that I've never had problems putting together dinner-groups at fur-meets which I'd match, man-for-man, against just about any similar SF-based group in terms of general geekiness and science-savvy. It's a shame we've grown apart, in some ways, and even more a shame that in some circles there seems to be actual animosity between the two groups. We may be two distinct cultures, but we're at least as alike as, say, Canadians and US citizens. We're non-mundanes, in a world where non-mundanes are all too rare and precious. Therefore we should be treating each other as respected and beloved cousins, if not brothers and sisters. Not calling each other names, as I regret to report happens all too often.

We're all fen together, is what I'm trying to say. Natural allies, not rivals. I mean, how many places can you find people who not only enjoy discussing terraforming over barbeque, but are good at it? Not many, in this sad and intellectually-declining world. And, while I can't speak for anyone but myself, I fully intend to treasure such individuals wherever I may find them. Whether that be in a fursuit, wearing an Imperial Storm Trooper outfit, encased in a suit of armor, or behind a deck of Magic cards. We're fen, all of us. And there just aren't enough of us around to allow for snootiness when choosing friends.

7.2   Distant Cousins

This article is a counterpoint to Rabbit's article published last Friday, Not-So-Distant Cousins.

Rabbit argues that furries and mainstream SF fans have a lot in common, that the two groups are similar enough such that "we should be treating each other as respected and beloved cousins, if not brothers and sisters."

For evidence, he cites a common geekiness, a shared private language, a similar culture, and finishes by drawing a parallel between fursuiting and cosplay. He says:

> We're all fen together, is what I'm trying to say. Natural allies, not rivals. I mean, how many places can you find people who not only enjoy discussing terraforming over barbeque, but are good at it? Not many, in this sad and intellectually-declining world.

I disagree.

I need to be careful when I'm talking about SF and related fandoms. I've gotten a bit of grief from fandom insiders in the past about things I've written in these virtual pages, most recently when I delved into the psychology of My Little Pony. I get accused, by geeky fans, of being dismissive towards fandoms, or belittling, or elitist. (I suspect that some people would be unhappy with my use of the term 'geeky fans', but I think it's clear enough.)

I don't mean to be negative towards fandoms, SF or otherwise. I've never been involved with a fandom other than the furry community, so my perspective is that of an outsider. The value of a fandom is self-evident: if they didn't have value, nobody would bother. And fandoms are full of great people too, although I wouldn't go so far as to claim they are any better endowed with the good and the great, any more that the rest of the world. I've certainly met, mostly within furry, excellent people who are also fans. Rabbit counts among that group.

There is important history between furry and SF fandom: furry started its life as a distinct phenomenon as an offshoot of SF fandom. But this is furry's history, not furry's present. Nowadays furry is a stand-alone phenomenon, a community of people drawn together not by fandom of pre-existing works of art, but by a common perception of identity. We see ourselves in anthropomorphic animals, we think of ourselves through the lens of atavistic behaviour, and most of us choose to socialize in a half-imaginary world, as if we really were an animal-person.

"Hi I'm JM, I'm a horse" is very different from "Hi, I'm Matt and I like Star Trek". Furry is personal: fandom is social.

Rabbit's article is built around a great anecdote. He shares a terrible meal with a group of furries, talks about geeky topics, and has a whale of a time. He points out that the experience could just as easily been that of group of SF fans.

And perhaps it was a group of SF fans: lots of furries geeky sci-fi lovers, including some paleofurs (a great term I've gleefully stolen from Rabbit) who have been around since there was much less physical and philosophical distinction between the two groups. A full 60% of furries responding to the Furry Survey (now curated here at [adjective][species] as www.furrypoll.com) categorize themselves as "a fan of science fiction".

Geekiness and SF fandom is a big part of the furry experience. But it's only a fraction of furry culture, and it doesn't define who we are. It's the furry identity that binds us together.

There is a reason why we furries are drawn to the community, and it's related to our internal world, not the external world that drives fandom. The furry experience isn't easy to summarize, but I think it's one united by introspective, personal things: our predilection to re-evaluate our sexual preference[1], our non-mainstream sexual identity[2], our non-mainstream gender identity[3], our connection to the idea of transformation, our animal-person roleplay[4].

Yesterday I had an experience comparable to Rabbit's SF-filled meal. I visited an old Tudor house on the outskirts of London with a furry friend, to stroll around the grounds in full spring flower, see an animal-themed sculpture collection, and have our very own terrible meal. Like Rabbit, we had a great time, and it had nothing to do with a potato and leek soup that had clearly been made using powdered 'french onion' soup mix.

(The exhibit, 'Beastly Hall', runs until 1 September 2013 at Hall Place & Gardens, Bexley, Kent.)

As we walked, we chatted about the furry experience. We talked about furry's demographics, our collective reaction to death in the fandom, our sexual interconnectedness, the politics of uncommon sexuality, the experience of travelling overseas to meet a love interest, fursuiting, roleplay. We also took non-furry conversational diversions into areas of mutual interest. And I'd argue that's what happened with Rabbit's group: they talked terraforming because the group shared a mutual interest, one that happens to be related to SF fandom.

Rabbit also says that we furries share a private language with SF fans. He cites 'fen' (meaning SF and other geeky-type fandom members), 'mundane' (anyone else), 'SMOF' (secret master of the fandom), 'gafiated' (gotten away from it all), and 'fafiated' (forced away from it all) as examples.

I've spent a lot of time as a furry and I can honestly say these terms, bar one, are new to me. Of them, I learned fen from a previous Rabbit article, and the other three are completely new, and actually kinda perplexing (what does a fandom master do, and why is it secret? what is the

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[1]About 60% of furries will consider themselves heterosexual when they discover furry; that number drops to 30% after five years. (link)

[2]For example, about 15 to 20% of us are zoophiles (link). For further evidence, ask your friends about their f-list.

[3]About 20% of us identify as something other than completely male or completely female. (link)

[4]These are all just examples of course, and won't apply to everyone.

'it all' that people might get away from? is that a good thing?). And the one term known to memundanemakes much more sense in a furry context. Compared to an animal-person, regular human beings seem totally mundane. I'm not sure I'd say that about someone compared to a geeky fandom member.

(Lest that final sentence seem too negative, please keep in mind that I'm an outsider to fandom. From what I have learned, within fandoms there often seems to be a wilful rejection of the outside world, a shared belief that being inside the fandom is something special. While I'm sceptical of the value of a group that implicitly rejects the outside world, I'm sure fandoms are spiritually fulfilling places. A bit like an Amish community, perhaps, but with better laptops.)

Rabbit is someone who straddles the furry community and sci-fi fandom. His mundane name is Phil Geusz, probably furry's most successful author, and one of our community's biggest names. His books are in close touch with the introspective furry experience: they dive deeply into what it means to be an animal-person, to be a furry.

The artifices of the various Geusz universe are often sci-fi, with technology such as genetic engineering providing an animal-person minority in a human population. But despite the sci-fi trappings, Rabbit writes quintessentially furry books. His themes are the thoughtful, introspective ones of furry.

Rabbit writes about religion: the spiritual aspects of furry (see The First Book Of Lapism). He writes about how it feels to be lost inside a furry skin, be it the intelligent nuance of his rabbits (see Ship's Boy, which is free on Amazon) or the flighty pride of a cheetah (see Cheetah's Win, collected in Roar #2). He is using sci-fi as a framework for a furry construction, something maintaining the logic of his worlds but otherwise rather beside the point. And that's how I see SF within furry: it's everywhere but it's not relevant to the true furry experience.

As a final point of contention with Rabbit's article, I also don't agree that we live in a "sad and intellectually-declining world". If that were true, nobody would be buying his books.

#

I came back from my trip to the animal exhibit to find a small group of furries, laptops out, playing Civilization and talking about programming philosophies. We're a geeky group for sure. But it's not what defines us.

7.3 Shy Bladder: Why Furries Get It and How to Cure It

Here's a scene familiar to most furries (or at least the 80% of us that are male): visit the toilets at a public gathering and you'll see furries queueing to use a stall. Furries prefer to avoid the urinal.

[This is a pause in my article to allow the reader to creatively speculate why furries might want a stall. Come back once you're done giggling.]

This doesn't normally happen. Out in the non-furry world, there might be one or two people who prefer to use a stall, but most people are happy enough to use a urinal.

Why the difference? Because loads of furries suffer from shy bladder, otherwise known as paruresis, a condition where they will be unable to pee when someone is nearby. And as it turns out, it's an easy problem to solve.

Here's the short answer: when you're at the urinal, think about sex.

Here's why it works:

Humans are social animals. In a social group of humans, there is a hierarchy among the males. You might consider high school as an example.

The hierarchy is based on a few things, but in general the biggest, strongest, most aggressive men are the ones at the top of the social tree. Those that act gracefully and helpfully become respected leaders; those that abuse their position become bullies. In either case, those lower down will tend to defer to those higher up.

We also tend to defer to strangers: outsiders, by default, are intimidating. This is a normal social response, and a response not restricted to humans. For example male dogs will act wary around other, unfamiliar, male dogs.

We all find new people to be intimidating. You might notice that, when you meet someone new, it's difficult to make eye contact. If you are introduced by a mutual friend, you might find yourself making much more eye contact with your friend than with your new acquaintance. And when approaching a complete stranger one-on-one, it's especially difficult, because you don't have anywhere else to look.

This is worse if the stranger is taller, stronger, or otherwise deports himself in a manner that could be interpreted as being high in the social hierarchy. It's worse again if the stranger is of a different race, and worse again if his race is unfamiliar.

The act of urination is an unconscious expression of social status. There is a wealth of data collection and psychological experimentation (ref) related to urination and paruresis that demonstrates this.

Figure 7.1: If Jonah follows him everywhere, the guy on the left isn't going to be able to pee for weeks. (source: Wikimedia Commons)

You might have noticed this your own behaviour. It's easy to urinate when standing next to someone familiar that you socially dominate, perhaps a young nephew. And it's difficult if your urinal-mate is a tall, large stranger of a different race. Like, say, All Black legend Jonah Lomu.

The solution to shy bladder is to think in a way that makes you feel like you're at the top of the social hierarchy. You can take advantage of the most basic animal instinct of all: sexual behaviour. By simply thinking about sex when you're at the urinal, you're imagining the fruits of being socially dominant. It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight, if you're thinking of a real sex act or just remembering some pornography: it's all the same to our animal brain. Just think back and recall some sort of sexual memory.

(And for the kinksters out there, or even just those who have curiously browsed /ah, it helps if you think of an unusual sex act. The weirder the better.)

It's a simple technique, and one that will come easily to most furries. We're pragmatic about sex as a general rule, and we're also familiar with thinking of ourselves as an animal.

Humans believe that they are logical beings. It's a feature of the way our brain works, and it's probably an important part of what makes us strive, as a species, to improve our lives through the

Figure 7.2: The guy on the left is peeing right now, but for different Jonah-Lomu-related reasons. (source: RFU hall of fame)

getting of wisdom. But it's a false belief.

The furry identity explores this dichotomy: the conflict between our human belief in rationality and the reality of our instinct-driven animal nature. By creating an animal-person avatar, we disconnect from reality enough to explore the idea of ourselves as ideal beings.

Our furry selves tend to be extreme. We imagine ourselves engaging in idealized sexual behaviour (whatever that might be for each person), and we tend to ignore the imperfections and challenges of reality. We imagine ourselves in a physically ideal form. We imagine ourselves as successful, powerful, valuable, influential. Sometimes these idealizations are subtle; sometimes they are extreme and over-the-top.

The furry identity is a kind of roleplay, where we explore a better version of ourselves. When we spend time in the headspace of our furry identity, we're learning about our real (human, animal) desires and motivations. I have observed that younger furries tend to explore more extreme fursonas, which moderates over time into an identity more closely related to our in-real-life self.

A furry that starts with a 50-ft tall dragon fursona who rules the world and crushes all in his wake, might find himself stymied by logistical problems when emotionally connecting with people exploring less extreme furry identities. Our young furry could start spending time with a group of other 50-ft dragons, but more likely he'll moderate his fursona, perhaps to a 20-ft dragon who

crushes and destroys only occasionally, when the mood takes him.

Like someone with shy bladder, or our dragon, the path to improvement often stems from an understanding of our animalistic drives. We can take advantage of our animal brain to put ourselves at ease at the urinal; we can also learn about our emotional needs by exploring an idealized version of ourselves.

In both cases, it helps to think in a way that seems irrational. Furry helps us think of ourselves as something other than a purely logical being.

There's an added bonus to this roleplay too: our idealized self – our furry self – provides us with an unconscious goal. The act of imagining the goal helps us see how me might achieve it.

For example: furry gymbunnies. A furry may start roleplaying a big, strong creature, and learn that such a body shape helps him feel good about himself. This might be through pride (an internal thought), or it might be through the reaction he gets from others (external influences). Our gymbunny would then think about how he can change his real-life body to match his idealized body. The furry world gives him a goal, something to work towards.

As an aside, the positive influence of goal-setting is why people think that The Secret works. *The Secret*, a fleet of self-help books and films and so forth, promises that – and this premise is so dumb that it hurts me to write – the universe will gift you anything you desire if you simply think about whatever it is that you want.

The Secret is, of course, world-class nonsense. But there is one positive benefit: it helps people identify a goal and use their imagination. And maybe the Secreteers, like our 50-ft dragon, will moderate their goal into something more realistic. Or maybe the Secreteers, like our gymbunny, will see the benefits of their goal and so be motivated to work towards it. (But regardless of their goal, and whatever the outcome, the Secreteers will forever be morons.)

The furry way is, at least, honest and fun and worthwhile in its own right. I don't think that imaginary furry goal-setting will translate into a successful self-help empire, Find Your Furry Fortune perhaps. But if it does, remember this: I thought of it first. Now I'm off to meditate on the idea of a nosebag full of golden oats.

7.4   Furry Reseaerch: A Look Back at Dr Gerbasi's Landmark 2007 Study

The first notable academic study on furries is six years old. Completed in 2007 (published 2008), Gerbasi et al's Furries from A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism) provides a review of furries based on 246 responses (including 217 furries) to surveys distributed at Anthrocon, plus an ad hoc 'control group' of 65 psychology students.

The study had two main goals: to test the validity of the usual furry stereotypes, and to investigate whether furries exhibit signs of personality disorder.

Gerbasi presented data to show that furries are an unusual demographic (anthropomorphic & zoomorphic interests; male dominated; wide range of sexual orientation), and that the group doesn't exhibit any special tendency for known personality disorders. Beyond that, there was one strong conclusion: that up to 46% of furries "may possibly represent a condition we have tentatively dubbed 'Species Identity Disorder'".

The diagnosis of Species Identity Disorder, a term invented by Gerbasi, is defined by her as "…considering the self as less than 100% human and wanting to be 0% human [and] is often accompanied by discomfort with their human body and feeling that they are another species trapped in a human body". Gerbasi makes a direct comparison to Gender Identity Disorder.

There are some problems with this.

The most obvious problem is the use of the word 'disorder'. This implies that there is some sort of problem. Gerbasi seems to be pathologizing furry, or at least a large subset of furry.

Psychologists understand that people have all sorts of different perspectives on the world, and a wide range of personality traits. An unusual trait is not a problem in itself. The word 'disorder' generally means that a condition is bad enough to be disabling.

Gerbasi's sample of 217 furries are all people who could manage the cost, transport, and social effort required to attend a large convention like Anthrocon. A large subset of these people cannot be mentally disabled: if they were, they simply wouldn't have been there.

For comparison, the 2011 Furrypoll, which was completed online by over 4000 furries, showed that about 11% of furries consider themselves either non-human or part-human. This is a long way from Gerbasi's 46%.

Gerbasi's unreasonably large number is probably an issue related to the slight unreality of a convention environment. This argument is made rather pithily in a paper by Dr Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, who disagrees with Gerbasi: "There are a myriad of reasons why furry participants at a

furry conference might identify as "less than 100% human," not the least having a hangover from furry drinks the night before."

Probyn-Rapsey's argument is laid out in her counterpoint, Furries and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al, published in 2011 in the same journal as Gerbasi's original paper (ref). Dr Probyn-Rapsey challenges Gerbasi's tentative diagnosis of 'Species Identity Disorder' directly: "What might be the treatment for such a condition?"

Probyn-Raspey's biggest problem is Gerbasi's link between 'Species Identity Disorder' and Gender Identity Disorder. Probyn-Rapsey points out that a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder is a controversial and politicized one, and that many people regard it a misrepresentation of people on the transgender spectrum (much in the way that homosexuality was formally considered to be a mental disorder in mainstream psychology up until the late 20th century). Gerbasi avoids any such discussion, simply referring to Gender Identity Disorder as if it were objectively diagnosable.

It's ironic that the mental health of furries is defended Dr Probyn-Rapsey, a feminism theorist. Furry is not a progressive environment for women nor for feminist ideas. We remain significantly informed by moronic (if well-meaning) advocates for 'men's rights', probably because of our crossover with the echo chamber of male-dominated online spaces such as Reddit. It's a pity, because feminism and queer theory provides a useful foundation for analysis of our community. However this is all a larger topic, perhaps worthy of a dedicated [adjective][species] article or three.

Gerbasi, for her part, doesn't actually question the mental health of furries or suggest that there a significant subset of us that require treatment. This is a criticism drawn only from her use of the word 'disorder' and her link between so-called 'Species Identity Disorder' and Gender Identity Disorder.

It feels to me that Gerbasi has chosen to introduce 'Species Identity Disorder' because she was hoping to be the first to identify a new psychological phenomenon. It's a professional coup to be a leader in any field, and I suspect that Gerbasi simply over-reached in her language. She is certainly a leading furry researcher and her instinct – that something special is going on inside our community – is, I think, spot on.

Her article was the first, and to date only, publication of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, which Gerbasi heads. The IARP is a grand title for three researchers operating from a small community college. And calling it 'International' is bit bullish seeing as it's based on the fact that they have scientists from the United States and Canada (it feels equivalent to a collaboration between people from Brighton and Cardiff). However, ornate naming aside, their research is of great value to the furry community.

The IARP are continually collecting data during regular forays to American furry conventions and online. They are strongly engaged with, and legitimized by, the furry community: their research is touched by the gilded hand of Anthrocon's Sam Conway (he appears as a co-author in

their paper), and they include Laurence Parry (Flayrah head honcho and founder of Wikifur) on an advisory board.

Perhaps most significantly, the IARP include a furry in the their research team: Courtney Plante, otherwise known as Nuka. Plante joined their group in 2011 and is presumably on the way to earning the first ever PhD in furry studies. (We are lucky to have another prospective furry PhD here at [adjective][species], Quentin Julien, who joined us as an occasional contributor earlier this year.)

The IARP regularly publishes data from their surveys, some of which I have discussed in previous articles here at [adjective][species] (link). Their methodology is intelligent and elegant. Most recently they have kicked off a longitudinal study, where they will be following furries over a significant period of time. I expect their study will dig up some interesting data, showing how we mature as members of the furry community.

You can visit the IARP homepage, browse their results, and see the full text of their paper at https://sites.google.com/site/anthropomorphicresearch/home.

Gerbasi has tilled the ground upon which a field of furry research is starting to grow. I've spent the past few days at the British Library reading up on the latest furry research and much of it is fascinating. It's difficult to imagine this research existing without Gerbasi's willingness to engage with the attendees of Anthrocon, and her direct exploration of furry psychology and popularly-held stereotypes.

The IARP dataset from 2007 is no longer considered to be particularly large or useful. Of all the available datasets, today's researchers are most likely to use Klisoura's Furrypoll (hosted here on [adjective][species]), for example in this Spanish study from 2013. However the focus of the IARP in recent years is more focussed: geared towards understanding furry psychology, rather than simply furry demographics. I'm fascinated to see what they will learn next.

7.5   Furry Research: Humanizing Animals

Furries play a starring role in a 2006 paper that explores 'animal geography', an emerging field of cultural research related to human-animal interaction. The paper's author believes that furry phenomenon is on the leading-edge of changes affecting society as a whole: the replacement of human-human social contact with human-animal social contact.

The paper, written by Dr Heidi J. Nast and published in ACME, is titled "Loving...Whatever: Alienation, Neoliberalism and Pet-Love in the Twenty-First Century" (link to full text). If that sounds like tortured prose, then, well, you should read the article itself. It's not easy going. But hidden under the unwelcoming academic language is a fascinating perspective on the furry phenomenon.

Nast's point mirrors one I've made in a previous article, Furry As An Alternative To Religion. She notes that traditional community structures – archetypically the rural village church – have broken down in the modern world. People have moved into cities, lost connection with the people around us, and this has left us feeling alienated and alone. It's a sad irony that many people feel lonely, while simultaneously being surrounded by other human beings.

I argued that furry provides that missing sense of community, and Nast makes a similar argument although she sees furry as one example of a wider cultural shift. She thinks that people are projecting human characteristics onto animals, as compensation for a lack of real human contact.

Nast sees this happening most obviously in the first world's growing trend for pet ownership. She argues that domestic animals are much less likely to be working animals, and much more likely to be a humanized 'member of the family'. Pets are de facto children to many people, offering a big advantage over real, human children: pets are less inconvenient. She writes:

> ...pets (especially dogs) today supersede children as ideal love objects; they are more easily mobilized, require less investment, and to some degree can be shaped into whatever you want them to be

Nast points to a growing marketplace for inessential pet 'care' as evidence. If she were writing her article today, she might also point towards the tendency for people to create a social media presence, like a Twitter feed, on their pet's behalf. And she argues that people are spending time and money on animals, instead of spending that time and money on humans.

The time and money being spent on non-humans is also institutional, including scientific research and charity. Cats can be cloned (for a price); you can take your pooch to a 'dog psychologist' (for a price); urban animal welfare is increasingly focussed on minimizing euthanasia (at a cost to

human taxpayers). Nast suggests that this time and money would be better spent on minimizing human suffering.

Nast feels that, by humanzing and infantalizing animals, we become less connected to other humans. She goes further to suggest that this is linked to consumerism, where animals are a convenient replacement for human beings because the relationship is uneven. We can, essentially, spend money on our non-human family without having to worry about whether it's useful in any way. As Nast puts it:

> . . . the hypercommodification of pet-lives [and our]. . . post-industrial lives and places. . . [are] tied firmly to neoliberal processes of capital accumulation more generally and the attendant growing gap between rich and poor.

Which sounds a bit like something you might read on an Occupy Pet Warehouse flyer.

To put it in a less tortured fashion: Nast sees our human-like engagement with non-human animals as evidence for the inhumanity of a capitalist world.

The furries fit into her argument because our human-to-human contact takes place through an animalistic lens. We are humanizing (virtual) wild animals and using them for our own ends. As she puts it:

> In the case of furry fandom, humans [present themselves as animals], this transmogrification apparently being needed in order to facilitate human contact, sociality, and love.

Like the people who humanize their pet dogs, we furries are focussed away from human society. We focus on ourselves, or on the part-human versions of our fellow furries, or on non-humans altogether.

Furry, in Nast's eyes, is a product of our dehumanized capitalist world. We socialize through the guise of animal-people because our world doesn't allow us to (easily) directly socialize with human beings.

<div align="center">#</div>

Now that all sounds like Nast has gone off the deep end. But plenty of evidence from the furry world supports her ideas.

Firstly, ever notice how much easier it is to interact with a fursuiter than the person inside? Most of us (and many non-furries) find it more natural to initiate social contact with the animal-person.

Secondly, furry's spread throughout the world broadly correlates with deregulated capitalism. First in the USA in the 1980s, then other modernized western nations such as the UK, Australia and Germany in the 1990s, then the remainder of Europe and South America in the 2000s, and more recently capitalist Asian nations such as Singapore, Malaysia and Japan.

Thirdly, we furries are relatively alienated from greater society. That's because, as a group, we often don't meet society's norms: perhaps it's because of unusual sexuality, or geekiness, or distaste for mainstream culture. This alienation reduces our engagement with fellow human beings.

That's not to say that Nast gets everything right. She lumps furries into three broad categories:

- egg-heads with more or less intellectual interests in how and why a society or group anthropomorphizes animals

- furries [who] assert a particular animal identity, either playfully or believing that they were animals in a former life, or that they are an animal trapped in a human body

- persons erotically and/or sexually invested in their animal-identity

It's not hard to poke holes in her categorization, an exercise I leave to the reader.

She also asserts that furry "involves largely 'white' adult populations". While mostly true, this misses the point: furry is not a monoracial phenomenon, as evidenced by its spread across the world. However I can see how she could draw this conclusion from her happily unscientific data collection method: looking at "photographs of furries reproduced on various websites".

#

The biggest flaw in Nast's ideas is, I think, her willingness to tie everything back to capitalism and consumerism. She presents it as a fait accompli, which I suspect is normal for academics performing research in the field of cultural geography. I don't want to explore the validity of this point of view – I'm sure that readers will hold a range of strong opinions – but suffice to say that I don't think Nast makes a compelling link.

To be fair, her focus may be geared toward the sensibilities of the journal that published the paper: ACME. ACME has the following mission statement, which you read at your peril:

The journal's purpose is to provide a forum for the publication of critical work about space in the social sciences – including anarchist, anti-racist, environmentalist, feminist, Marxist, non-representational, postcolonial, poststructuralist, queer, situationist and socialist perspectives.

So ACME is not exactly aiming for political moderation.

As an aside, check out ACME's unintentionally ironic guidance for prospective authors: "The style that ACME advocates emphasizes clarity, accessibility, and care in writing."

Happily, Nast's article is written to a higher standard than that. However it's not an easy read by any means. So I can't really recommend it, despite its worthwhile and unfamiliar approach to the furry phenomenon.

Dr Nast is writing a book on the topic: Petifilia: Volume 1. Presumably furries will make another significant appearance. I'll read it with interest.

Chapter 8

June

8.1   Adding Structure to Life

Every now and then, it's important to take a step back and gain a little bit of perspective. It sounds cliché, of course, and there are a lot of people in my life I can imagine scoffing at the type of post I'm about to write, if not that very phrase itself. In fact, there are plenty of other posts that I have in the docket, but they can wait for another time, and I hope you'll begrudge me a fluff post while I gain my perspective. Also, a trigger warning for some brief but frank discussion of suicide, and excessively sentimental foxes.

There's a lot that can be said about emotion. Hell, there's a lot that has been said about emotion; so much so that there is only the most minuscule of portions that bear repeating. If there is one thing worth noting, though, it's the intensely dire sensation each of our own emotions carry to us. They press against us and burden us with incredible weight, and even though there's a lot of really flowery prose one could write about just how much our emotions impress on us, it really just boils down to the fact that an entire portion of our brain is focused on feeling things at all times, almost without rest. This dire aspect makes it quite difficult to accept commiseration, to comprehend that many of us try to understand those around us be way of relating their experiences to our own. To hear someone say that "what you're feeling is just like when I felt something exactly like it!" Or "that's something that everyone goes through." To hear that this burden isn't yours and is hardly unique is not a comfortable thing to hear, no matter how true.

I go through bouts of depression about once every six or seven months that last for about a month. I freely admit that this is hardly uncommon. Freely because I'm actually feeling really good right now, and have been for a bit. I can remember the urgency and importance of the way I felt, even when it's not something that's pressing on me right now, as it was then. This difference is sometimes a vague feeling: like, "yeah, feeling good is different than feeling bad". Sometimes it's a very concrete sensation, such as now being able to tolerate heights as something that's merely scary, and not "oh God am I going to jump!?".

Being able to take a step back, no matter the clich, is the sort of helpful thing that lets me see and understand what exactly is going on, and, understanding, helps provide me with a path forward. Not a solution, of course, just a path. I don't do meds; I have a deep-seated paranoia of that attempt at a solution despite seeing them work wonders for someone very close to me. Their reason for taking them is very situational by their own admission: given a very nearly unsolvable problem and no time to work on it, one takes what space one can in order to move forward.

That's what the step back grants me. Even though the source of my own overwhelming emotions is something decidedly innate, something more biological, the space gives me the room to take that into account. If, for example, I give myself the room to understand that those feelings of

hopelessness and dread that seem to be stemming from work are more just the handicapped sense of self involved in depression, then I can more easily make the choices I need to stay healthy.

This is really new to me, honestly, and thus my fascination. I started to understand it last year in October and November when I was going though a similar period, but it occurred alongside a work trip to Copenhagen that left me no room for myself. Heathrow's terminal 5, with it's glass-walled balconies and walkways, and the hotel's looming 15 degree tilt made me frankly fear for my life. The previous March saw an attempt at suicide, and the very limited amount of space I (figuratively) had to step back into was hardly enough in November for me to work with this problem constructively, and it took getting kicked back by the motor tic in my neck coming back after an absence halfway through the trip and forcing me to slow down to understand just what this space meant to me.

April and May were much different. Things started to go pear shaped in mid-April, and, though the tic had once again left, I knew right away what I had to do. I slowed my velocity at work (with my boss's blessing), held off on writing any articles, and took the space I needed to stay healthy. There was another work trip on the middle of this, but it was out in California, where, even though I was still working my tail off during the day, I had more of a support network than Copenhagen had to offer outside of work hours. While things got their worst after that trip, I still had my space, and so everything was different. The aching pressure in my chest was far less than before, along with the sense of dread and suicidal ideation. Things were off, but as long as I could take that step back, they hovered a notch or two above 'bad'.

That's a lot of words, and not one of them was 'furry', 'subculture', or 'fox-person'. For those of you still reading, I appreciate your tenacity, because honestly, it's this furry subculture, this ability to be a fox-person among friends that provides the framework I need to remain grounded while taking these countless steps back, lest I just withdraw completely into myself.

Toward the end of the summer of last year, it was JM who IMed me to ask how I was doing. My emotions were coming through in my articles, he said: I was on point when I was happy and maudlin when I wasn't (I know this is basically the most maudlin thing I've ever written, but stick with me here). I took time off then to gain some space and work on improving things, but having this framework kept me from zooming off to far into the distance. Most poignantly, it was the death of my friend, Margaras, that helped prove the worth of maintaining the ties I had with those in my social circle, furries all.

The fandom as a subculture plays a very unique role in or lives, I've noticed, in that it provides a sort of skeleton that we can use to help give our lives their structure. I found myself discussing this with two LDS (that is, Mormon) missionaries who stopped by the other day, when I asked them how their faith fit into their lives in terms of identity; I was raised by two staunch atheists, I didn't experience religion as a community until a brief stint attending a Unitarian Universalist

church in my early twenties. Their conversation lead to the topic of chosen family, that closest of social circles. They said that their growth out into the world had structure, pacing, and direction that they felt would have been missing without the framework of their church.

I said at the time that I agreed with them: having that missing from my life led to the described lack of direction in my own growth. My time in the dorms was a stark example of that. However, in light of these last two months, and all that I've learned over the last year and a half, I'm not sure that I had told the truth. Furry is lacking a lot of things that make a church, and so yes, my growth within the fandom was hardly predictable; no mission for me. But that said, it was still just that: growth within the fandom. I have this framework in my life to add meaning and direction. That's what kept me and so many others going after Margaras' death, what got me through last march and the end of the year, even what helped me during this last sprint. I still had structure, even if I didn't feel well. Something to hold me up and keep me from deflating completely.

A few weeks ago, I tried to explain some of these thoughts in the form of a small experiential game, a little bit of interaction intended to convey a point, called A Full Life. In it, your goal is to make the fullest life you can, even when there are things standing in your way preventing you from feeling fulfilled, your sense of 'full' handicapped. I think that these frameworks – the church for those missionaries I'd talked to, furry for me, and countless others – help us out. They don't necessarily solve problems (and may often cause them), but they help keep that handicapped sense of self from constricting too small and squeezing out everything that's good in life.

So. Apologies for the wash of an article, and thank you if you've made it this far, but do me a real big favor: sometimes, when you've got a bit of time, think about the ways this fandom is meaningful to you. Think about the ways you must be meaningful to those around you. Maybe take a moment to talk about it with someone, or if not, at least just appreciate it. I know I do.

8.2   An Argument for Confomrity

Money does buy happiness.

More specifically, money buys happiness up to around US$75,000 per year. Beyond that, money has very little effect. (Ref, full text.)

The generally accepted reason behind this phenomenon has nothing to do with money 'providing' happiness, rather that a lack of money makes people unhappy. At US$75,000 pa (and beyond), day to day money problems are essentially nonexistent: when a bill arrives, the bill can be paid.

A 2011 paper, written by Dr Marla Carlson and published in Theatre Journal, "Furry Cartography" (full text here), discusses the important of money in the context of the furry community. I originally intended to review her paper as part of my occasional series of "Furry Research" articles here on [a][s], but her field can be written about with far more authority by my fellow contributor Quentin Julien (and my recent article reviewing the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, or more specifically the rejoinder by IARP member Nuka, shows how I, as an amateur, can get it wrong).

Briefly then, Dr Carlson talks about the need to earn money, and how (in a capitalist world) "one must be an individual, but one actualizes that individuality through the purchase of appropriate name-brand products". She sees furry as a version of this concept. Our 'performance' as furries, the way we actualize our furry identity in the real world (perhaps a purchased fursuit or a commissioned work of art) "fuels the buying and selling of commodities both real and virtual". Here, she is talking about the furry economy; goods and services sold to help people pursue their furriness.

Furry is personal. It's about identity, or as Dr Carlson puts it: "for some as an expression of an inner essence and for others as escape from a restrictive human persona". Yet public and outward displays of our furriness are important. Dr Carlson argues that "the fandom manages its public image in order to remain edgy but not out of bounds", which roughly defines the range of expressions we allow within the furry community: the extent to which people can express themselves while still fitting in. So an animal-themed t-shirt in public is okay, whereas 'anatomically correct' gear is not.

External expression of identity is important to everyone. People in the mainstream are often flummoxed by expressions from the fringe. Why, they might argue, do gay people need to make such a big deal about their sexuality; why can't they just leave it at home and act 'normal' elsewhere? The answer, of course, is that people in the mainstream also express themselves, just that they are lucky enough to conform to society's norms without having to make any special effort.

(As an aside, this blind spot is known as majority privilege. To choose another convenient example: the subset of gamers that get fired up whenever someone points out that women aren't fairly represented in the gaming mainstreamthese guys are used to games being male-dominated, so anything challenging this feels like it's pandering to others, so they complain that they're being marginalized. See also: straight people who begrudge redefinition of the word 'gay'.)

It's sometimes difficult to express furriness in a public space. Furry spaces such as conventions, private parties, and corners of the online world, are environments where we can express ourselves without having to worry about conforming to the mainstream. Furry spaces can act as important relief valves: they allow us to vent the pressure of acting 'normal' (or 'normal enough') in the wider world. We understand that we may need to mask our furry selves in some circumstances: maybe at work, or around extended family.

Some furries, of course, manage to 'opt out' from the requirement for conformity by largely excusing themselves from society. Many of us fantasize about this (just read Rabbit's dreamy 'what if' article from a few weeks ago, speculating on the founding of a furry town). A typical fantasy involves a big rural space away from other people, an idea that probably requires a big chunk of cash, to say nothing of the psychological challenges of isolation. For most of us, the fantasy will remain a pipedream.

For those of us who can't escape, there is a balance to be struck. The need for personal expression must be tempered with the requirement to meet society's norms. An external expression of identity that fails to meet mainstream standards can be costly: wearing a collar will probably harm your chances of getting that office job.

The way you present yourself affects how people react to you. If you fit in, people are more open, lowering the barrier for a social interaction. People are more likely to engage with someone who doesn't scare the horses, so to speak.

(There is also a phenomenon called the spotlight effect, familiar to anyone who has found themselves underdressed for a social gathering. Most people become anxious when they feel like they are presenting themselves in an inappropriate fashion. This social pressure is often more about self-perception than about the others: it's also felt by transgender people trying to 'pass' for the first time.)

This article, then, is an argument for the value of meeting the expectations of mainstream society. This article is an argument for conformity.

I argue for conformity of appearance, not conformity of thought. The two are often confused. The sight of identically-dressed commuters is often derided, as if all commuters were mindless automatons, as suggested by pejorative terms like rat race. But nothing is further from the truth: each commuter has a personal identity, one that is not on display. A furry in a business suit is still a furry, just one in a different costume.

Figure 8.1: This is an Andrew Baines painting, "Escape of the Corporate Battery Hen". They look like furries, fetishists, and deviants to me. You can buy it at www.andrewbaines.com/prints.html

I believe that meeting society's normsconformingincreases personal happiness. It's a compromise, and the requirement to moderate external expressions of identity can be challenging. But the reward is a better, broader, happier life.

Someone who puts on a good 'normal suit' will be less constrained by the wider world. A good 'normal suit' doesn't mean you are normal. It simply means that you restrict what you show to the outside world. Most people would argue that it's a bad idea to share teenage sexual exploits in a public forumFacebook, saybecause they may linger on the internet to be discovered by future employers, lovers, or family members. Someone who refrains from sharing details of a raucous 18th birthday is simply keeping their 'normal suit' on.

Those furries who are meeting society's expectations are giving themselves more opportunity in life. They are likely to earn more money, be freer to travel, and have more options to express themselves as furries. To put it another way: would you rather wear a collar to a job interview in 2013, or a fursuit to Eurofurence in 2015?

It's not very romantic to suggest that the best path is through engaging with the mainstream; through moderating one's appearance, through earning and spending money, through ignoring the philosophical messages of Rage Against The Machine. It's especially distasteful if you, like many

furries (including me), are most at home in the fringes of society.

The argument for conformity is a pragmatic one. It's about balancing an individual interior with an acceptably bland exterior. It's about, on one hand, working within society's constraints and, on the other, finding appropriate outlets for self-expression.

Andrew Baines says that conformists "head off to work nine to five every day and they'll do this until they turn 60 and then they'll probably get a gold watch and drop dead". I think this is false. Instead, I think they experience the relief and benefits of conformity, and never look back.

8.3 An Argument for Non-Conformity

Okay, so the title is a bit grandiose.

I want to address some of the ideas that JMs previous article brought up for me. Its a magnificent read about the ways in which the mainstream can benefit those who participate, touching on privilege, presentation, and what we do in private. JM and I seem to come to a firm agreement that his articles are the more immediately applicable, whereas Im busy navel-gazing; furry does not occur in a vacuum, though, so perhaps I ought to talk some more about the wider social implications of furry.

As with anything that can be simply negated by adding 'non-' or 'ab-' (you know, like Abby-Normal), there are two sides to the coin, and more often than not, the interaction between the two is hardly a simple binary, often involving friction, and sometimes quite a lot at that.

As many readers can attest, there has been a wave of "be yourself" propaganda pushed on children and young adults in America over the last thirty or so years, appeals to the sense of non-conformity that each of us carries within us to some extent. Much of this, of course, was awful, saccharine filler that served no purpose other than to make someone money, and blanket non-conformity is hardly something Id advise someone to undertake. However, just as in the rest of the world, furry has something to benefit from careful application of non-conformity.

Non-conformity and subculture have mixed for a long, long time. Anyone who has been part of the goth scene, or the punk scene before it, or the rock scene before that, or the jazz scene before that, knows this. These are, of course, examples that take the idea of non-conformity and spread it throughout the very interest that brings them together, turning it into something of a fandom itself. Even beyond the idea of fandom, though, non-conformity and its close cousin, transgression (an act that goes beyond generally accepted boundaries), have served groups within society as long as there has been society; one need only look to the history of early Christianity to see that. Non-conformity and transgression are hardly artifacts of modern western society.

There are, in fact, a lot of things about furry that can be seen as transgressive, both within and outside of the fandom. Some minor transgressions, acts that take place outside accepted boundaries, are seen as core ore close to our subculture in many instances: street-fursuiting, a propensity for collecting stuffed animals, or even hanging tasteful furry art in the home or office (these two pieces grace our walls right in the entryway, along with a ton of pictures of our dogs) are just a few ways in which we can step into furry space in a non-furry context, even if only a little bit. Minor transgressions, to be sure, but its easy to see the roots of transgressive behavior within our fandom. What could be more non-conforming than not conforming to the generally accepted species, after all?

This is, I believe, part of the reason for the relatively accepting nature of furry as well. A group which is, in a way, transgressive at its core is often a safe space for those with a stake in otherwise transgressive behavior. This is more than just "falling in with a bad crowd" – after all, were not that bad, are we? Rather, this goes along with the idea of finding a safe space for oneself. A safe space is, in some ways, a space in which one can engage in either transgressive behavior or discuss, think about, or otherwise wax metatextual without fear or repercussion, or at least in the hopes that thats the case. This is the purpose of the safe-space signs in schools, which serve this purpose in a subtler way, after all: in a place where acknowledging LGBT issues positively might be seen as a transgression, or at least a form of non-conformity, these signs show that the educator is attempting to create a place free of that association.

When it comes down to it, the ideas of non-conformity and transgression serve an important role to minority identities. As this article bluntly puts it:

Queerness is not just about whom or how you fuck. It is also about not being part of that mainstream culture, about being decidedly against that mainstream culture. It is about disruption. It is about putting things at risk. Of course, both that quote and my own words are incautious: minority identity, and in this example, queerness, are generalizations used to described trends in identity shared within a social group. I know there are several individuals who would disagree. I have my own hesitancy, here. There is an uncomfortable stage for some in the reclamation of a word where it still carries some of its old connotation before the new one has gained general acceptance. "Queer" is in that space for me, because it still has its connotation of "weirdness", it still denotes transgression. Ill hasten to add, though, that this is an ongoing process, within myself even as it is within society at large. The word "straight", after all, has been largely accepted to simply imply heterosexuality, despite its prior connotations of "going straight", where homosexuality was seen as crooked or deviant (which has been notably lamp-shaded by the movie Bent).

However, I think that the word "queer", and others like it, are important in the sense that this sort of non-conformity is vital to identity. When it comes to arguing identity (that is, discussing the point with the goal of changing minds, not necessarily having shouting arguments – though sometimes that too), it is advantageous for the argument to be cast in ones own terms. When the argument from a minority is cast in the terms of the majority, the minority often only receives relatively small concessions, rather than recognition. Transgressive language and non-conformity help to recast the argument so that there is a greater likelihood of ones point being made forcefully.[1]

While conformity is generally the province of the majority, non-conformity is hardly detrimental to it. The culture of the majority is a static behemoth, whose only purpose is to remain precisely where it is, as it is. This is all well and good for those within the culture who benefit from that

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[1]Note that this is a very reductive view on critical- and queer-theory, topics very much worthy of their own post(s). I have to get to the point somehow, though! If this sort of thing is interesting to you, I highly suggest prowling around more: theres a ton out there.

stasis, but this isnt the case for everyone, and often isnt even the case for the actual by-the-numbers majority of individuals wrapped up in society. Minority culture and identity, subversive and transgressive, have the job of pushing the majority culture forward in such a way as to improve life for more and more of those in society, attempting to break that stasis to benefit those involved with their culture and identity. A lot of social progress that humanity can claim comes from this tension and friction; the majority promises safety, the minority promises progress. Both have a purpose.

So, lets tie this back to furry and the idea of conformity.

When it comes to JMs article, I really must stress that I whole-heartedly agree with it. There is a lot to be gained in terms of safety by conforming to the majority. One furthers ones standing within that culture by not, say, wearing a collar to ones interview. This helps in terms of personal progress: a better job, perhaps a greater amount of respect from those around you, and yes, even the possibility of using that progress towards ones goals within the fandom (EF2015 sounds like a good idea – JDs been talking about it for a while now).

Non-conformity is nothing to feel bad about, however. Neither is conformity! Both have their purpose in our lives, and every single one of us expresses both in some way or another at different times and in different aspects of our social interaction for our own reasons. Even furry. Transgressive acts such as street-fursuiting, publicly visible gatherings such as conventions, and even talking about furry from a critical theory standpoint on a publicly visible website have helped to legitimize furry as an identity, a membership, a subculture. Conformity, on the other hand, helps many the individual members of furry to keep things moving forward by benefiting from what the majority has to offer to those who go along with it.

Chapter 9

July

9.1   Scylla and Charybdis (or, the Art of the Lie)

Reading through JM's and Makyo's posts here got me to thinking about the nature of presentation and the public face, and from there to one simple tenet I have lived by. Having lived in many ways and in many places, from my often rocky relationship with my family and cloistered visits to famously conformist South Korea, to my time in the furry fandom and in other such gloriously tolerant places, at some points I have had to live by this tenet by force, but thankfully more often, by choice:

The face we show one person need not be the face we show all people.

I know, I know, plenty of ink's been spilled over "authenticity", and we're told from childhood that "honesty is the best policy". In the end, though, only the demands of others to know all they desire about you and childhood conditioning drawing from this motivate these feelings. It is, in the final estimation, relatively easy to stay true to yourself while, in a calculated manner, making sure that some people don't see what you don't intend for them to see. At first blush, this may seem like a suspect notion, even one indicative of sociopathy. Think for a moment, though: does anyone really want to hear about what you had yesterday for lunch?

The telling of such lubricative lies and stories along with the careful holding-back of information is integral to this bewildering phenomenon called society, regardless of how we feel. Naturally, this sort of lie is crucial because it allows people to interact with each other without the abrasion that would result if we were as true and open as many purport to seek to be. We build up, consciously or otherwise, a public face: a mask that we show others in place of our true face. Those that fail to do so, whether through a lack of capability or desire, generally end up marginalized: out of work, shunned by others, or, occasionally, dead.

As furries, then, we find a tactic used time and again in the animal world: camouflage. Camouflage of dress, of speech, and of action. These aspects of disguise are the tools and the material with which we build the edifice that we intend others to see. They form the public face, as furries or even just as people. For if we must craft a mask just to function in society, we must craft it as best we can, rather than just letting the cards fall where they may. Hoping blindly that we'll be accepted, no matter how awful it feels to choose to deliberately manipulate the emotional reactions of those we meet, will do us no good.

Balance is required, though. We find in ancient Greek mythology an apt picture of our dilemma: that of Scylla and Charybdis, the famed great hazards of the Strait of Messina. Scylla, it was told, was a terrible sea monster with six heads, and Charybdis, a terrifyingly deep and powerful whirlpool. And so too for us: to one side, the Scylla of too little – indiscriminately wearing and doing what we please anywhere and at any time, the wearing of collars at all times or barking at

strangers – threatens us with ruin. More dangerous to my mind, though, is the Charybdis of too much, of selling your soul and losing what makes you delightfully unique, of wearing business clothes everywhere because you've forgotten what anything else feels like. Judiciousness is required, too. A three-piece suit would be almost as out of place at a furmeet as a collar would be at a job interview.

We draw inspiration, then, from the delicate art and subtle science of the lie. To put it poetically, a well-crafted lie is a story told about an alternate world which is easily confused with one about the real world. So too for our camouflage of word and deed : a story told in speech and movement of someone who is an ordinary member of society, about whom it cannot be said that something suspicious or untoward is going on. We must be careful, though, of Charybdis again: the lie bites both ways, and it isn't unheard of to wind up living the lie you have accidentally convinced yourself you believe.

So what's to gain from all this trouble taken? It seems to me that the presentation of a false face to the world is the only way to balance your true self with the demands of society, and in so doing guard yourself from society's assimilative pull. Even better, it allows you to hide your true preferences from someone who might seek to use them against you.

It can attract friends, true ones, too: people will enjoy knowing you more if you still have the decency to treat them properly as a fellow human being even if you don't really feel personally invested in the way you're interacting with them. And oftentimes, those you meet out on the fringes as they sail carefully between Scylla and Charybdis, or even find some small success taking Odysseus's famed daredevil route, will be some of the best friends you'll ever make.

It's hardly as bleak or as do-or-die as I've said here – at least, not most of the time. Society is often forgiving: in practice, people have a Somebody Else's Problem filter for the strange and unusual, which those like us can gleefully exploit. A good example of this is the noted example of the residents of every college town whose residents have become inured to strange happenings, have seen it all, and now don't even blink at the strangest happenings. The important thing is to keep the transgressive and the truly strange out of view, which seems to be the rather successful tack the furry community as a whole is consciously taking, and that many other subcultures have taken with varying degrees of consciousness and success in the past.

And thus in the end, it's important not only to know the rules of the world, but also to know when you can bend or shatter them. A life lived placidly within imagined and self-imposed boundaries is barely a life lived at all. It is, after all, only in the lighting of a little non-conformist lantern that you can signal to those other interesting strangers that you're someone worth talking to. Just don't let it turn into a ship-consuming bonfire, of course, and you should be fine.

9.2   On "Real Life"

One of my classmates in college was pursuing what I believe was a double major in engineering and music composition. He was a pretty great guy, at his most helpful when it came to the discussions on sound and acoustics. He was also a huge nerd, but so were we all: we were the first class to help get the composition department at the university up and running, so we were the ones actually pushing to get the degree program started – my nerdiness took the form of running the composition lab.

For his junior recital, one of the two we were required to give consisting entirely of pieces we composed, he performed an extended three-movement piece for solo French Horn titled "Journey To Arelle". It's one of those titles you have to say out loud to get the joke. The song was a tone poem about what mental processes a character left to idle on Word of Warcraft must go through when their player went off to "deal with RL".

The idea of RL – "Real Life" – in opposition to things furry is, I think, an interesting and telling one. There's a lot to be said for immersion when it comes to gaming, for sure, but many furries apply it to much more than just an experience that can be had sitting at a console. We're hardly the only ones, of course, but it helps in understanding just how the fandom works to know that it occurs in a context that is not always "real life."

Role-play in and of itself is usually set as an opposite to real life. The idea of something in opposition to structured activities such as role-play is not a new one; this is easily seen in the previous example, of course. One is spending the time and effort to pretend to be this character within the set bounds of the game, computer or otherwise, in which that character ultimately resides. There is a literal role to play of some other living (or perhaps undead) being, here, and to attend to daily tasks that may be wildly out of character if not outright out of period is certainly returning to "real life". There just isn't the connection tying the two lives together, there.

The difference between a strict role-playing type scenario and furry, however, is that furry has no rules, no objectives, and no canon. This isn't to say that it can't, of course, as plenty of folk I know within the fandom play furry-themed RPGs such as Ironclaw or Usagi Yojimbo, or even appropriate not-strictly-furry games to their own uses, creating new species to be used in, say, Star Wars themed pencil-and-paper role-playing games.

Furry lacks a central story, though: there's no canon to guide us other than the shared interest that ties us together. In our case, though we often play the roles of our created or chosen characters in various ways, from interacting with them in text-only chat rooms and MU*s to commissioning artwork or dressing up in giant animal bags at conventions, we don't have rules or story to separate

out a perfectly livable daily life as an animal person from a perfectly livable daily life as someone pretending to be an animal person.

I think this shows that furry is something beyond just role-play: it's a whole separate context, a separate life lived in opposition to what a lot of people still think of as "normal". We incorporate role-play as a tool rather than as some sole form of interaction. We live our lives out as furries here and there, but for the large part, much of our interaction within the fandom remains a form of escapism. Beyond that, however, furry as a subculture is still seen by many both inside and outside the fandom as an interest that's bizarre at best, downright abnormal at worst.

This isn't an opinion held by just those outside, as I've said. The fact that we maintain such a strict separation of concerns when it comes to our shared affinity for anthropomorphized animals and day-to-day interaction with those who don't share our interest shows our own willingness to accept what we consider a normal life alongside the lives we lead within our chosen subculture. It's willful and, as JM and I both point out, hardly negative and not without utility. A sense of normalcy pays off just as much as all that we gain by virtue of this transgressive subculture.

This isn't the type of thing that furry is alone in creating. There are other hobbies and lifestyles – especially the latter – which readily fit into a separate context from everyday life. These are the types of things where one might find oneself being reminded, "don't cross the streams". The further something is from being regarded as a part of the main-stream (you'll forgive the mixed metaphor, here), the more likely it is to be seen as constructive when one prevents it from overlapping with day-to-day life. Philately, while definitely a bookish and stereotypically nerdy sort of hobby, is something one might freely talk about with friends and coworkers outside the stamp-collecting subculture. One's collection of firearms or bedroom proclivities rarely mix well in so-called polite company without also being some sort of transgression.

This holds especially true for lifestyles. In recent years, even in this last year, being lesbian, gay, or bisexual has hardly entailed the same amount of hiding a core part of oneself at work and with friends, separating out a portion of life from what's considered normal by society at large. This wasn't always the case, though, and it's humbling to look back, as someone who grew up fitting more or less solidly into one of those categories, and see how differently the world works today in terms of "crossing the streams".

The interesting thing to consider with this analogy is the level of choice involved in furry as compared to sexual orientation. I used the term "lifestyles" intentionally above, though it's fallen out of favor when referring to one's orientation, because of the fact that there exists a significant portion of the furry world that lives furry, identifies as furry, and feels that they don't necessarily have a choice about doing so, much in the same way that many live gay, identify as gay, and feel they don't have a choice in the matter. One can look at a hobby from the outside and see it as something that someone chooses to do and generally be correct about that, but not always. For

some, those often called lifestylers, it truly can be seen as something more akin to an orientation or identity than a simple hobby, and thus be harder to separate from every day contexts.

JM and I have both discussed the usefulness in both accepting and rejecting a separate context for furry in our lives, depending on the scenario, and I think this acceptance of our subculture as a slightly-less-than-real life when stood up next to what so many of us refer to as "RL" is worth taking a step back and looking at. It's hardly a big thing, or an exciting thing, or a new thing, but it does show the ways in which we differentiate furry from other things in our lives, and even define the boundaries of what each of us considers to be the furry fandom.

9.3   Evidence That Furry is Leading the Rest of the World

The Stranger, a well-regarded alternative weekly newspaper from Seattle, has just published their Queer Issue for 2013 to coincide with the Seattle Pride Parade.

There's a remarkable article titled Floating in Shades of Grey, written by Ray Van Fox, which talks about the furry experience. Except that Ray isn't a furry – his vulpine nom de plume is coincidental – and his article doesn't reference furry. Ray talks about a largely online community, where he and the other members "are re-creating ourselves in our own image in order to be seen for who we actually are."

Ray is talking about the well-worn furry ground, where we present as animal-people in furry spaces. This is usually online for furries, but also real-world spaces like a private party or a convention. We choose an identity for ourselves, one which matches our internal perceptions, and we interact as if that identity were true. It is true, in its own way, but it's different from the arbitrary real-life meatbag with which we are burdened.

This duality, our arbitrary meatbag versus our created identity, is at the centre of the furry experience. Our two faces can be very different: different species, gender, sexual preference, size, colour, personality. (Many furries prcis their new identity by naming it using the convention [adjective][species].)

We furries may be the first large group to collectively choose to socialize using identities of our own original invention. We're certainly experimenting with the limits of identity in a way that no other group (of comparable size) is. Our genesis came when furries moved away from the first wave of 'furry fandom', made up of sci-fi fans who liked anthropomorphic characters, and towards today's second wave of furry as an identity. It's no coincidence that this change coincided with mainstream adoption of the internet: the online world allowed us to form our community.

The rest of the world is following in our footsteps. People are learning that the identity through which they socialize can be a different, truer one than their arbitrary meatbag. Second Life is an obvious example – there are plenty of furries but there are also plenty of other people keen to explore the freedom of an identity that can reflect their true, internal nature.

Grindr is another environment where people project a different version of themselves. A Grindr identity might be a hypersexual version; maybe a little hornier, a little better-endowed, a little younger. And the social environment in which Grindr users meet is (presumably) a space where those identities are 'real', and where mundane aspects of life don't intrude.

It happens on Facebook, too. Users show a version of themselves that reflects their true interests and identity. For example, someone who is a young parent can choose to use their baby as an icon. This allows them to reframe the dependent relationship as one of equals, just at different stages

in life. The adult is a former baby, and the baby is a future adult. (Similar things can happen later in life, when the child becomes the carer for a dependent elderly parent.) Something similar can happen with pet owners too, where the human can reframe their own life in the context of the love and luxury they are able to afford their domestic animal. In both cases, the Facebooker is expressing that their care provides a sense of internal wellbeing, something important and worthy.

It also happens in queer communities. Ray Van Fox is genderqueer, and his community has grown on Tumblr. He has found a community where he can express his true identity:

> Somehow these folks, without even knowing some supposedly basic things about me, have created a safe space where I can be my most authentic, uncensored, almost fully ungendered self.

(A quick note on pronouns: I've chosen to use 'he' for Ray, because that's how he mostly presents himself out in the real world. It's not perfect but I think it's better than using a gender-neutral neologism, which I find to be jarring. Neither option is perfect, so I've chosen what is least-worst, at least from my perspective.)

Ray's description of his 'safe space' sounds a lot like the furry spaces in which I spend much of my time.

Here is his description of his safe space:

> Lots of us have names and personas and pronouns that are different from the ones we have in "real" life, but we aren't using them in order to deceive anyone.

And:

> I'm exhausted with all the tiny lies and self-betrayals involved in trying to squeeze myself into an identity that isn't quite mine. Why would I leave the house and deal with that, when I can get online and interact with others without having to package myself in any shape but the one I've got?
>
> Tumblr provides a level of anonymity in the act of self-creation – of constructing my blog persona – that gives me freedom from others' preconceived notions based on my body. Because it's all about what you say, not how you look.

In all these examples – on Second Life, on Grindr, on Facebook, on Tumblr – groups of people are taking advantage of the online world to experiment with identity in the way that furries do, and have been for the last 20 years or so. We're not exactly leaders – people aren't walking around with WWFD bracelets or consulting the latest advice from furry think tanks – but we are the first

to cross this new ground. And so we can expect that non-furry groups will experience the positive and negative aspects of our furry experience as time flows on.

I think that fellowship is the biggest gift the furry community has given to us. We are able to be ourselves and be treated with respect, in a way that many of us cannot easily find in non-furry spaces. I think that this change is already affecting mainstream culture: as more people learn the value of self-expression, those on the fringe are finding more acceptance. As examples: there has been a seachange in attitudes towards gay people; there are signs that the world is starting to move beyond gender binaries (although there is a long way to go); an inclusive, intelligent third wave of feminism is gaining traction.

People in these three cases (gay people, trans* people, women) are all on the fringe, and are exploring aspects of identity. Members of all three are having to make compromises in the way they present themselves in society, something which they are not required to do in the 'safe space' of their respective communities. Some will refuse to compromise (to their own detriment – they will be given the perjorative label 'militant'), and some will not explore their true identity. But the majority will balance two identities, internal and external, and they will have to deal with the challenges this presents.

There has been a lot of talk here on [a][s] recently about how we, as furries, manage our internal animal-person identity with the need to conform to society's expectations. I won't cover that ground again here. Suffice to say that compromise is necessary, and that there is no perfect solution.

The requirement to balance a true internal identity with a curated external identity is challenging. It can require vigilance, especially if we want to keep ourselves googleproof. There are techniques and tools, however they are yet to reach maturity (Google Plus looked promising before they decided that we wouldn't be allowed to socialize under an invented identity). But the tools will improve as the mainstream world catches up with the furry community, as people learn the freedom and happiness that a safe space and self-consistent identity can bring.

As Ray Van Fox puts it:

> That space may be made up of a bunch of "strangers" who might look different than I imagine, but I can bank on the fact that their reasons for befriending me have nothing to do with my body. And I can't tell you how comforting that is.

You can read Ray's full article here. He lives at http://www.rayvanfox.com/.

9.4   Evidence that Furry is Following the Rest of the World

One of the best benefits from participating in a creatively chaotic community such as furry is the ability to be whoever you'd like to be. It's an important outlet for many of us – our expressions tend to come out in terms of being who we feel we're not necessarily allowed to be from a greater cultural perspective. Most of us didn't fit in, wherever we came from. Most of us were too geeky – too awkward, even. Too loud and boisterous, too strange or too tweaked. As a result, we've fled to and cultivated ourselves a safe haven from emotional treachery. The only explicit laws against fantasy in most cultures are typically put in place to prevent fraud and violence. However, there also exists a social hierarchy which takes every opportunity to reinforce one's alleged place in its expansive machinery. A plethora of societal and financial pressures as well as generalized threats on survival are applied in order to enforce this order whenever possible. A lack of order, as the host species appears to feel, is a formula for destruction.

Furries balk at this thought. Furries pretend to be whoever the heck they want to be, regardless of what others may think of them – at least non-furries, anyway. The community attempts to shed the societal pressures; intellectual disdain; and hatred toward experimentation; to craft crafts of provocative proportions. As a result, furries are outcasts for the things they enjoy doing, allegedly hated by the rest of the world for what's perceived as anywhere from fun to enlightenment.

One of the sad ironies of cleverly crafted utopias are their abilities to mimic and even amplify the societal sundries they're attempting to flee. Furry is Schrödinger's Island.

Schrödinger's Island is a neologism piggybacking on the quantum parable of Schrödinger's cat. Its use attempts to describe a social phenomenon wherein participants of the furry community simultaneously attempt to receive recognition from the greater culture that has allegedly rejected them and equally boast– sometimes to arrogant degrees – about how separated they are from the culture as a whole (e.g., aggressively boasting about furry pride to a group who is perhaps ignorant or just doesn't particularly care). Essentially, on one hand, actively identifying as a furry is an emotional protest toward the arbitrary boundaries enforced on them in a culture that rejects such sense of freedom to self-identify. Without the element of societal rejection from a puritanical society, it's very difficult to argue that furry would be what it is today. And yet on the other hand there's this intense craving to be accepted for who we are – hence the hand-to-forehead magnetism induced by the more stereotypically vocal among us.

This psychological schism doesn't have a tendency to exist in one person: it's a social superposition which causes emotional projections of what brought us here in the first place, leading to bizarre circular arguments, self-fulfilling prophecies, and a naively malevolent darkness that allows for all sorts of horrible abuses to happen. To summarize: what is a hero without a villain? And

what happens when the hero yearns for villains to confirm their heroic existence? Will they find villains they didn't know of before, or will molds be formed to redefine their villainy? Let's go with a common (and easy) villain of the puritanical mindset, as well as the reputation of the furry community as a whole: sex.

Statistics regarding the opinions on sexual psychology in the furry community make this quantum ideology stand out like a sore thumb. Frequently, when furries are polled, they feel the rest of the furry community is way more sexualized than they are personally – which is to say not very much, of course. A cynic would argue blatant hypocrisy, whereas an easy counter-argument is citing statistics regarding artistic production: there are always, on average, much more general audience productions than erotic productions on a given furry site, at a given furry art show or in a given furry artist alley. Yet, as furries, we know a dead horse when we see one, so let's shirk the stud-shank. There's an interesting curiosity in having sex panic in the first place. Let's talk about sin.

Sin isn't simply biblical. All cultures have sins. Sins are a means of social control enforced by those who feel emboldened and uplifted by their followers. What the leader deigns, the followers enforce, creating exiles in their wake and loyalists for the cause. There are many cultural sins – sex is just one of them. But sex has been used as a means of social control back before the bible, so to declare sex as a weapon of the puritan would make Ghengis Khan cackle.

Sex is used in the furry community in a similar way – though mostly to control the perception of what others think of us. Attempting to portray an opposing opinion on the sexuality of furriesdoes not usually end well. Trying to enforce it as a good thing usually creates strong opinions one way or the other regarding what others will think of them. It's rather difficult to have an intelligent discussion about sex in mixed company – and this isn't even really a furry problem! But the pushback in talking honestly about sex touches on one of the more cardinal sins of the furry community.

Picture a parade. Fursuits and other costumes cruise through. Everything is normal. Try and picture one of the costumers striding past you while performing in character, utilizing the physical mannerisms of their costumed persona to really bring that outfit to life. Then imagine them locking eyes on you with excitement, pulling off their fursuit head and striking up a conversation with you while the parade is going on behind them. What is your perception of the crowd around you?

The first perception that comes immediately to mind is annoyance, irritation and fingered, judgmental murmurings from the rest of the crowd. This fursuiter has sinned. They ruined the fantasy.

But this sin goes beyond fiction. This sin in particular – the ruination of fantasy – has deep, deep roots that go to the core of our emotional utopia and reach further into the puritanical society we feel exiled by, even through attempts to exhume the very thing many feel furry provides as a shelter from attack. To present furry as anything potentially adult to others is a sin: that ruins the

fantasy of furry being acceptable by society, and its members as acceptable by proxy. To state that public furry groupings could potentially be an unsafe place is a sin: that ruins the fantasy of furry as a safe-haven from the greater villainy we ran from. To make claim of potential malevolence, be it sexual, violent or psychologically manipulative by another furry, is a sin: that ruins the fantasy that furries are friendly and affectionate. Analogies apply equally to the puritanical society furry attempts to escape.

Yet this inability to even question the fantasies that exist within the furry community itself – combined with the Internet's infinite appetite for being proven permanently right – allows the very abusive villainy furries fled from to flourish. As is standard in the society furry left behind, the survival response to prevent one's self from becoming either insane or isolated becomes apathy. A cascade of anti-intellectualism occurs due to a rising desire to become the most apathetic of a given group, and from there the cycle of psychological (and, though thankfully relatively rarely, physical) abuse continues to tumble along in the darkness.

The movie Inception provides a fascinating metaphor for the horrifying phenomenon caused when one becomes consumed by the fantasy world. As the protagonists dig deeper into the dreams of their victim, they go further and further into the many layers of dreams, with limbo being the final layer. But limbo is infinity. Limbo is simultaneously everything and nothing. Limbo is exactly what you make of it. And its perfection is as much beautiful as it is horrifying. Beautiful in its ability to create exactly what you want and how you want it; horrifying from the existential stress imposed from over-pressing the dopamine depressor.

Inasmuch as we may be leaders by actively experimenting with our newfound freedom to abstractly identify ourselves, there exist strengthened and well-enforced cultural patterns from this identicraft that caused us to disobey standard social order in the first place. Yet instead of attempting to address these patterns, they are culturally shoved under the nearest rugs and dismissively declared as drama. In that regard, the furry community unfortunately follows the beat of the same oppressive drum this escapism attempts to shut out: protect the fantasy of order at all costs.

The social order of furry is founded primarily on the quality of fantasy. It is our culturally accepted vice. But what makes us followers instead of leaders in this regard is our inability to give our fantastical society a strong foundation by questioning and maintaining its fantastic structure. Leaders fight for their followers with bold and courageous tactics – not propaganda.

9.5 Mortality

Death is important to us. When a furry dies, we – as a group – react strongly.

Following the death of a furry, there is often an outpouring of grief. Much of that grief is from furries who have never met the deceased.

Here's the first comment on Flayrah's news post about the death of Lemonade Coyote (link), a well-regarded but not especially well-known American furry:

> I don't know the guy, but I'm sorry this happened and I'm sorry for his family.

This comment is typical of the sentiment expressed by many furries in this sort of situation. It's heartfelt, it's sweet, and it's clear that the commenter has been personally affected by the death of a stranger. The only thing that our commenter and Lemonade Coyote have in common is that they are both furries.

It's unlikely that our commenter would be similarly affected by the death of a non-furry. This is not to say he would be cold-hearted, just that he is less likely to be personally affected by the death of, say, a fellow college student (that he had also never met). As has been discussed in [a][s] in the past by Makyo (Death in the Fandom), there is something about the interconnectedness of our furry community that makes death affect so many of us so greatly.

I think that there are a couple of reasons why death is so important to us as a group.

For starters, furries are young: about 90% of us are younger than 30 (ref). And like any group of young people, furries are more inclined to spend time with peers rather than the wider community.

We live in a world where our social choices, at least outside of high school, are dominated by urbanization and the internet. We are able to socially discriminate more than at any other time in human history: we can choose to hang around with people of similar interests, similar culture, similar socio-economic background, and similar age. Most of us are not required to participate in a community dictated by proximity, such as in a 1600s village, or a tribe.

This shift in the way that humans form social groups began with the Industrial Revolution, just 200 years ago (the blink of an eyelid in evolutionary terms). It is the cause of significant challenges for many people in today's world. We share our living space with an overwhelming number of people. Because we can only manage a limited number of social connections, we must be choosy. This process of exclusion makes it easy for someone to feel lonely despite being surrounded by people, or to be rejected from a social clique.

I've written previously about how society can be alienating (Furry as an Alternative to Religion). I believe that furry provides a rare social environment that is based on inclusion. It's one of

the great things about furry: everyone is welcome by default. Our culture is more in tune with the idea of community as a whole, compared to the wider world.

Our close community means that we may be personally saddened by the death of another furry, even a stranger. We have lost one of our own, and we know that the death will be felt keenly by other furries.

It doesn't help that furry deaths tend to be sudden. This is due to our demographics: largely young, and largely male.

The leading causes of death among young men in the United States (ref) are (1) Misadventure (or 'unintentional injuries', perhaps from a car accident) and (2) Suicide. This is how furries die too.

Death through misadventure and death through suicide are relatable for most of us. We may have done something stupid, or otherwise been in a situation that placed ourselves at risk. And all of us – yes, all of us – have had suicidal thoughts. We can personally relate to these causes of death, and it's natural for us to fantasize about them.

When we fantasize, when we fixate on death, we are experiencing a mortality crisis. We fantasize about how the moments before death must have felt, we fantasize about last thoughts, we imagine how we might have acted in the same situation. We find death (when it's relatable but not so close that we're overcome by grief) to be engaging.

We sometimes feel bad for being engaged by death. We read through last comments on FA, or Twitter, or Livejournal, and try to picture the subsequent events. And then, sometimes, we feel remorseful, as if our reaction were disrespectful. But our reaction – the mortality crisis – is normal, and normally positive.

In the non-furry world, the death of a celebrity can cause a similar outpouring of grief. Despite the celebrity being a stranger, many people feel compelled to express their personal reaction; perhaps in a comparable fashion to our commenter on Lemonade Coyote's death, or perhaps in a more overt way. Such expressions of grief are sometimes pathologized: people assume that the griever imagines a personal connection with the celebrity. Such behaviour is sometimes compared to stalking.

FindAGrave (www.findagrave.com) is a website where people can leave comments, virtual flowers, and nauseating animated gifs by way of remembrance. As an example, the amazing screencap below is taken from James Gandolfini's page:

In this case, it's easy to assume that these commenters are delusional (along with many, many, many others on FindAGrave). But I don't think that all those who feel a strong connection to Gandolfini are confused over whether there was a real relationship. It is simply that Gandolfini was well known, so it's easy to fantasize about his death.

You will always be loved.
- tabbycatsrock
Added: Jun. 27, 2013

R.I.P. James u will be missed.
- Lorraine
Added: Jun. 27, 2013

you are loved!
- jackie
Added: Jun. 27, 2013
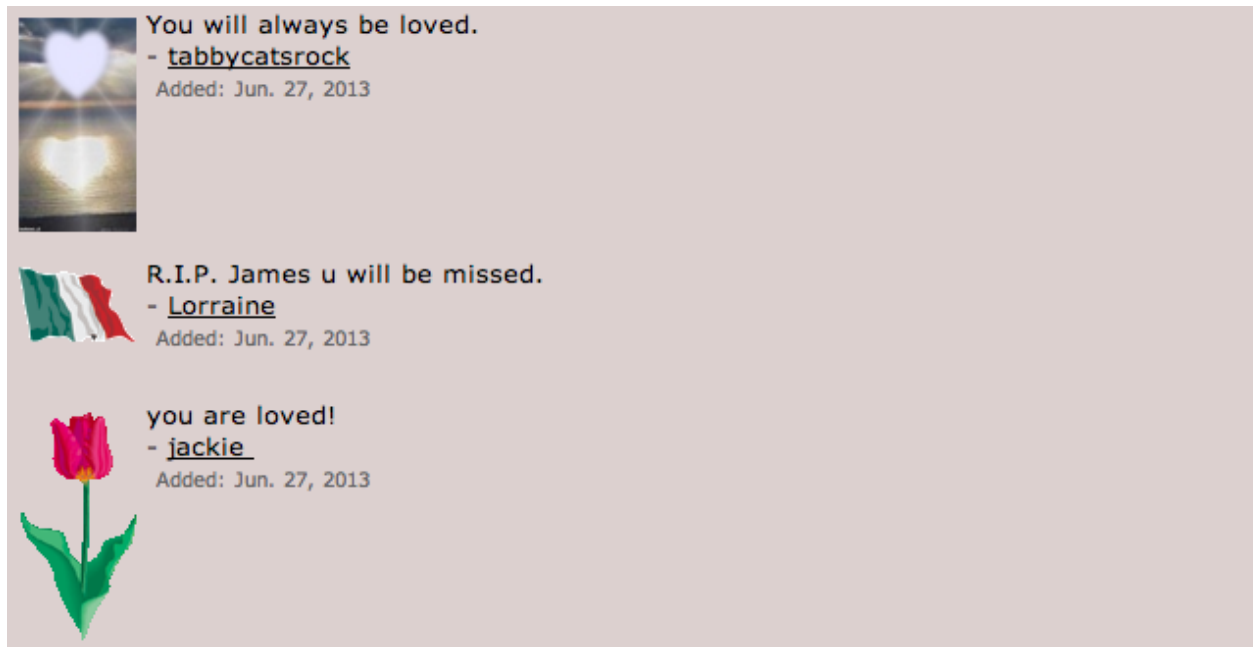
Figure 9.1: FindAGrave

Gandolfini's death provoked a minor mortality crisis in some people, just like the death of Lemonade Coyote did for some others. Public memorials like FindAGrave (or the comments sections on Flayrah) provide an avenue to express that feeling. Such comments are mostly about the writer, not the deceased.

It's rare for us to think about the inevitability of our own death. Our innate ability to avoid thinking about death is probably an evolutionary trait. Life would simply be too stressful if we were to consider our own death when engaging in risky activities, like crossing the road. So on the rare occasions where death comes to mind, it can provoke a strong and unexpected reaction – a mortality crisis.

A friend of mine recently witnessed a pigeon's death. He heard it crash into a second-story window, and watched as it twitched and died on the pavement below. It took around 15 minutes to die as my friend stood transfixed, unable to pull himself away from the grisly spectacle.

He told me that he felt ashamed by his compulsion to watch the pigeon's death. He described feeling queasy and stimulated, almost excited. In hindsight, he judged those feelings as 'wrong', that he should have been less curious, or more respectful. But there is nothing wrong with his feelings. They are the same ones that provoke an emotional response when we read about the death of a furry, or seek out footage of fatal accidents on the internet, or watch clips of the September 11 attacks.

Oliver Burkeman, a British journalist who writes on mental wellbeing (here), argues that thinking about death is healthy. The prospect of death – that of our own or of a loved one – puts the value of life into relief, and can remind us of those things we find valuable. Burkeman suggests that we should take time to consider the inevitability of death. It's a kind of small, planned, pre-emptive mortality crisis.

I agree that this is a healthy way of managing the spectre of death, and we can learn to live life in a more enjoyable fashion if we are able to consciously acknowledge mortality.

From a linguistic point of view, I think that the term 'bucket list' is aesthetically ugly. It's a clumsy reappropriation of an anachronistic metaphor, 'kicking the bucket'. But from a philosophical standpoint, a 'bucket list' is a good example of Burkeman's principle in action. We have a limited time on Earth, and the thought processes involved in compiling a personal wishlist can help us broaden our horizons. As always, we make ourselves happy through personal improvement: physical, mental, spiritual.

Furry offers great opportunities: opportunities for travel, for personal relationships, for new experiences. A furry 'bucket list' might include a visit to a large convention, or a trip around the world to meet a close friend. Such goals are rarely easy, but they are often achievable for someone who is motivated. Consideration of death can add purpose to life.

9.6   How To Be A Babyfur

So, you're a babyfur.

I know, I know: you're not one of *those* babyfurs.

You probably like wearing diapers. You probably find that you can unwind and relax when you're doing childish things. You have probably found that, as time has gone on, you've started incorporating "adult baby" elements into parts of your life – clothing, accoutrements, roleplay – to add to your enjoyment of diapers.

Or maybe you just find the art cute, and the characters easily relatable. Or maybe it's more of a sex thing. Or maybe you like to watch cartoons and talk in baby talk. Or maybe, just maybe, you have a professional 'adult' who looks after you in a nursery once in a while.

In any event, you're probably aware of how other furries react when they hear about babyfurs. They find babyfurs distasteful. And so you probably have a babyfur-only identity that is separate from your 'normal' furry identity. Or maybe you just keep it to yourself.

As a babyfur, you probably feel like you can't be open and honest with your local furry group. I think there are more people in your situation than you realize.

I think that there are a lot of babyfurs in the furry community. I don't know exactly how many, because no large survey has ever asked. But I think it's a lot, perhaps comparable in size to the other large minorities we have within furry: the genderqueer, the zoophiles, and the women.

We here at [adjective][species] would like to hear from the babyfurs. We've created a short survey – which is anonymous and confidential – and we'd like you to respond. But more on that in a moment.

I have only anecdotal evidence that suggests, to me, that there are a lot of babyfurs out there:

- Babyfur events, usually room parties, occur at every convention. Some of these are G-rated exercises in icecream and Power Rangers; some are explicitly sexual; many are a bit of both. These events occur despite being organized via word-of-mouth, and occur despite the perception that they are taboo within the wider furry community.

- Real-world AB/DL (Adult Baby / Diaper Lover) events, which occur in some cities, are often full of furries.

- Furries who are open about being a babyfur and are also socially presentable often find themselves approached – in private – by friends. These equally presentable friends are either curious about what baby-furriness entails, or they are already clandestine babyfurs.

I know that all this is true because I have spoken to lots of babyfurs.

I think that babyfurs are suffering from something that plagues many marginalized groups: that the most visible members are not the best ambassadors.

By way of explanation, consider the following thought experiment. For each of the minority groups I'm about to list, imagine a stereotypical member: (1) gay, (2) feminist, (3) Fox News viewer. (I have tried to select three categories with little overlap.)

Chances are that you thought of a pretty normal person for those groups of which you're a member, and that you thought of a grotesque caricature for those groups you tend to avoid. This is a normal response for a couple of reasons:

- Humans are naturally distrustful of the unknown. This instinct is the root cause of racism and homophobia, and it takes a bit of mental effort to overcome.

- If you're not a member of the minority in question, and nor is anyone in your social circles, you're more likely to have been exposed to the extreme elements of the group; the bad ambassadors. So, outrageous pride costumes inform perspectives on gay people, feminists are seen as angry and intolerant, and Fox News viewers are mindless gun-toting yahoos.

This totally instinctual human reaction can be seen in attitudes towards gay marriage in the United States. If you don't know someone gay, you are much less likely to support gay marriage. From Slate (link):

> Research shows that knowing a gay person makes you 65 percent more likely to support same-sex marriage, and having a conversation with that gay person about marriage raises the figure to 80 percent.

(I should note that this pattern is certainly not restricted to the US, just that it's a been political football, and the Americans love collecting polling data.)

There's some science that suggests that babyfurs, like gay people (and like zoophiles), are more likely to generate a negative reaction. It's a linguistic problem: the sexual practises of each of these groups is suggested in the group's name.

A study published in 2011 sums up the issue in its title: *Disgusting Smells Cause Decreased Liking of Gay Men* (full text, pdf). In brief, the study showed that people felt less warmly towards gay men when they were in a smelly environment. The effect wasn't seen towards other minority groups. Essentially, the smell of poo makes gay men seem kinda gross, because they engage in anal sex.

As the study author commented in Scientific American (link):

I think what's happening is that the social category of "gay men" (and to a lesser extent, gay women) is one that is defined by the sexual act I tell my class to imagine if the first thing they learned about a person is that he or she frequently masturbated to pregnant women. The sexual disgust response would likely eclipse every other aspect of the person, such as their also being a fireman, a pharmacist, or Irish.

The problem is similar for babyfurs: those people who don't know any babyfurs aren't easily able to create a mental image that goes much beyond the diaper, and the (imagined) smelly contents thereof. And so babyfurs tend to keep quiet about it, because they know to expect an initially negative reaction.

The urban myths that circulate about babyfurs always focus on disgusting behaviour. The stories are inevitably exaggerations, speculations, or outright false. Furry is not awash with people soiling themselves in public or leaving dirty diapers in convention hallways. There is a large minority of babyfurs (perhaps including you, dear reader), and they are being respectful of those around them, and keeping quiet.

This is the point in the article where I say that I am not a babyfur. It shouldn't matter whether I am or not, but I know from experience that it does. My first article about zoophilia for [a][s] (I've written three) was criticized for being self-serving, that I was just trying to justify my own proclivities. I'm concerned that this article will lead people to draw a similar conclusion. There is nothing wrong with being a babyfur, and it's a bit sad that I feel the need to distance myself personally, but unfortunately I think it's the best (or least-worst) course of action.

Which brings me to my slightly hypocritical advice: I think you should tell furries that you are a babyfur. There are a few reasons:

- For your non-babyfur friends, you'll be a good example. You will be disproving the kneejerk babyfur stereotype simply by being yourself.

- For your closeted babyfur friends – and you almost definitely have some – you'll be a role-model.

- For yourself, because you'll be able to be open and honest with your friends. And that's good for the soul.

I met a furry named Karis a few years ago, at a convention. He's charismatic, well-liked, and a generally great guy. He's one of those furries who seems to be forever surrounded by friends. And he's a completely open babyfur.

His baby-furriness was gossiped about when he wasn't present. People were surprised that he could possibly be a babyfur.

Karis was comfortable and happy to answer any questions. He directed people to his website, Karis' Playground (http://www.karisplayground.com/), which features webcomics like World of Wetcraft. He changed the mind of a few people simply by being open, and I'm guessing that there were some closeted babyfurs present. I'm guessing that they felt a surge of joy at seeing Karis being treated respectfully.

And so I recommend that babyfurs be open, or at least relatively open, because I think that there are lots of you out there. You'll have plenty of support.

I also hope that this article helps, because it's never easy to hide a part of your personality. It's mentally stressful, and it's easy to start seeing yourself in the grotesque artchetype: it's easy to be self-hating. It's never healthy to deny a safe sexual urge: it can lead to stretches of self-hatred and denial, interspersed with bouts of sexual mania. (I've written about this before.) Far better, if you can, to accept yourself, respect yourself, and love yourself.

Starting next year, the Furrypoll will have a question asking "Are you a babyfur?". In the meantime, we have a Babyfur minipoll, which is anonymous and will not be shared beyond me, an (anonymous) babyfur helper, and Makyo. The responses will be used in future [a][s] articles. Please participate, and help us get an idea of what the babyfur community looks like. Alternatively you can email me directly at jm@furrynet.com, or just leave a comment below.

Please also share this article within babyfur circles. I'd like to hear from as many people as possible. It's about time that babyfurs were recognized by the furry mainstream.

Figure 9.2: Cheetahs: thinking skills need work

9.7 Carroll Ballad's Duma

Duma (2005) is Carroll Ballard's fourth and final great animal film. I've discussed *The Black Stallion* (1979) and *Fly Away Home* (1996) before; I'll eventually round out my series with *Never Cry Wolf* (1983).

Duma is the name of a cheetah, one of the protagonists in the film. He and Xan, a young boy, take a journey through southern Africa.

I want to start this article by talking about *Duma*, and what I learned about cheetahs from watching this film. I learned that cheetahs are morons.

There are plenty of cat antics in the film. But Duma is no lolcat. He is docile, obedient, and permanently confused/apathetic. He has a blank-faced stare that betrays a lack of understanding, and a lack of curiosity. If you put Duma on a giant roomba, he'd just sit down and look bewildered.

It's a running joke in the film that Duma is part domesticated, so his survival skills are hopeless. His hunting in particular is portrayed as being somewhere around the "I can't find my food bowl" level. At one point, he saves the day "hunting": he lopes after an ostrich and eventually stumbles/gets confused by a nest full of eggs. Success through incompetence.

So you might think that *Duma*'s boneheadedness is a deliberate plot device, and that he's merely the Sarah Palin of the cheetah world. Except that a look at the credits reveals that Duma is played by five different cheetah actors, and I think it's unlikely that the casting call for *Duma* was along the lines of "Wanted: witless cheetahs".

I can only conclude that, in the evolutionary lottery, cheetahs traded brains for speed. To put it another way: Usain Bolt can run the 100m in 9.58s, but that doesn't mean you'd want him to do your tax return.

Duma's antics provide a modicum of light relief in what is a dark film. Much of the time, his haplessness reinforces the ever-present danger that surrounds our main characters for most of the film. The spectre of death is very real in *Duma*.

The film starts, as with Ballard's *The Black Stallion* and *Fly Away Home*, with the death of a parent. Xan's father succumbs to cancer, leaving Duma in Xan's care. The death of Xan's father is a bookend, and the film must end with a different kind of death: the inevitable death of the relationship between Xan and Duma. Xan must, eventually, abandon Duma to the wild.

Xan – and Duma – must learn to accept their separation. This is the emotional core of the film, as Xan learns to see death as a transition, a necessary part of life. He starts the movie as his father's child, and must end it as an adult. Duma starts as a kitten, and must end it as a self-sufficient wild animal.

So it's a coming-of-age film. Curiously, Ballard never wanted *Duma* to open with a death. This was a requirement from the studio funding the film (Warner Bros), who saw this as a critical trope to begin an 'animal movie' (see The Lion King, *The Black Stallion*, Bambi, etc). Ballard felt that this requirement 'Disneyfied' his film, forcing *Duma* away from a realist adventure and towards singalongs or action figures. In the end, Ballard gets his way through sleight of hand: the death of Xan's father is something different from anything I've seen in cinema. It's slow and jarring; subtle and sudden.

There is a secret about adulthood, something that children don't know: adults are making it up as they go along. Children know that they are ignorant of the wider world, so they look to adults for guidance. Adults, secretly, also know that they are ignorant. Age teaches us adults to hide our incompetence, and act as if we know what we're doing.

In Ulysses, James Joyce suggests that fatherhood is not about the sex act that leads to birth some nine months later, rather a responsibility inherited from one's own father. The oldest of each generation is obliged to perform the paternal role.

And so it is with Xan. Xan's father decides drive across South Africa to release Duma. When he dies, the mantle of fatherhood is passed onto Xan, and Xan proceeds to follow through with the plan.

It's a terrible plan. Xan makes a series of life-threatening decisions that Duma, his de facto child, blindly follows. They become stranded on a salt plain and are, but for the machinations of the plot, a couple of days from death.

Anyone who has spent time in isolated rural areas, away from fresh water, will know how deadly they can be. This is captured in *Duma*: the South African wilderness is actively dangerous, malevolent.

Duma and Xan are joined in their journey by Ripkuna, a young father from a small village who is equally ignorant to the dangers of the world. The three form a loose codependent relationship, relying on each other's skills to hurdle the deadly challenges thrown up by nature.

Xan and Rip's relationship, despite their ages, is one of equals. They are both resourceful, selfless, intelligent, and deeply distrustful of each other. (Duma provides a physical threat towards Rip, equivalent to Rip's physical advantage over Xan.) The distrust is informed by race: Xan is white, Rip is black.

Xan and Rip never acknowledge race. The racial tension comes from their clear cultural differences. Xan's background is very white. His parents are farmers, his family lives in the city, he goes to a fancy school. In a country where less than 10% of people are white, there are no black faces anywhere in Xan's world. It's similar for Rip: his racial 'otherness' (to Xan) is clear from his clothes (compared to Xan's school uniform), and their eventual visit to his village shows a world where white people are a curiosity at best, dangerous at worst.

To understand the depths of the racial politics, some insight into South Africa is required. This is a country where a tiny minority of the population asserted the nakedly racist Apartheid policy over the majority. The mindset that led to such a situation is explored by the great South African writer J.M Coetzee in his novel Summertime:

> In those days the white South Africans liked to think of themselves as the Jews of Africa. [] All false. These people were not tough, they were not even cunning, or cunning enough. And they were certainly not Jews. In fact they were babes in the wood. That is how I think of them now: a tribe of babies looked after by slaves.

and

...they turned their backs on [history], dismissing it as a mass of slanders put together
by foreigners who held [white South Africans] in contempt and would turn a blind eye
if they were massacred by the blacks down to the last woman and child. Alone and
friendless at the remote tip of a hostile continent, they erected their fortress state and
retreated behind its walls.

Anyone who has seen District 9 will note similar themes.

The racial politics of *Duma* informs the relationship between Xan and Rip but it's never overt,
never even mentioned. It's just one more challenge, one more threat, for them to overcome. They
do, of course, eventually learn to trust one another. It's testament to Ballard's brilliant direction
that the tension, and its eventual joyful release, comes without any direct acknowledgement of
race.

Duma was a failure on commercial release. Ballard felt that Warner Bros mis-sold the film by
marketing it as an old-school simple children's film ("Lassie with cheetahs"). A rave review and
some rare personal advocacy from Roger Ebert saw it eventually get a limited release, where it was
largely ignored. Ballard blamed the studio: "In my view, they had a terrible ad campaign that was
way too soft and made it look like a namby-pamby kiddie movie."

There are some problems with the film. For starters, there is some solidly lame CGI, particu-
larly a scene that sees Xan, Rip, and Duma caught in a swarm of tsetse flies.

The actions scenes are well directed, and while Ballard never resorts to making quick cuts of
shaky-cam in the hope the viewer will get caught up in the appearance of excitement (ala Michael
Bay), he clearly struggled to get good takes form his animal actors. In some cases, he cuts between
shots of a dangerous animal (a lion, a crocodile, a warthog) and shots of humans acting as if
they were in danger. At their worst, these scenes remind me of the Radioactive Man movie, after
Milhouse (playing Fallout Boy) goes missing:

> Editor: Thanks to modern editing techniques, we can use existing footage to com-
> plete the film without Milhouse! Watch
> [rolls badly-edited film]
> Editor: Seamless, huh?
> Director: [pause] You're fired.
> Editor: And with good cause!

In the end, I don't think that *Duma*'s commercial failure is due to its cinematic flaws or its
marketing. It's more to do with its structure: it starts with a death, and takes a while for Xan and
Duma to start their journey. And it's a dark film: their journey is fraught, the relationship between

Xan and Ripkuna is complex, and it ends with the inevitable separation of Xan and Duma. *Duma* starts and ends on a low key, and slightly depressing note.

The story is about how Xan is forced, by the world, to leave his childhood behind and begin a life as a stony-faced adult. It's an excellent piece of cinema, but not exactly the sort of whizz-bang ending that leaves audiences feeling happy and buzzed.

The audience, though, will leave with the strong and lasting impression that cheetahs are flummoxed by just about anything and everything. Those scenes are the best scenes: Duma gets confused by water; Duma gets confused by a TV; Duma gets confused by a car.

In that spirit, here is a picture of a DVD sleeve with four pictures of Duma, all looking confused:

Duma is cheap and easy to find. I bought my copy from Amazon for 3.

This is the third of four articles on the films of Carroll Ballard. All four movies are great. Choose your species and join us:

The Black Stallion (horse) *Never Cry Wolf* (wolf): coming soon *Fly Away Home* (goose) *Duma* (cheetah)

Chapter 10

August

10.1 Only 22% of Furries are Gay

Every three weeks, the Londonfurs hold a meet in a City bar. The bar is closed to the public on Saturdays, so it's a private party.

Every three weeks, one or two hundred so furries turn up. And just about every three weeks, there is a new member of the bar staff boggling at the crowd.

I recently overheard a new bartender ask, "So, are you all gay or something?". And his furry customer responded, "Yeah".

(But he was wrong. We're not all gay. We're not even mostly gay.)

The bartender made a comment and a knowing face, as if the Furry Universal Gayness Theory explained everything, and the furry wandered off with his drinks. I thought of correcting the bartender as he shaped to serve next in line, but I figured that he probably wasn't interested in a short lesson on furry demographics. And besides, I was thirsty.

The truth is that about 22% of furries are gay.[1]

Furrypoll (formerly the Furry Survey):

- Furrypoll is online-only, running since 2008.

- The number of annual respondents has varied between 3,000 and 10,000 with no significant change in results over that time.

- I'm counting gay furries as ones who are "completely homosexual" or "mostly homosexual".

- The International Anthropomorphic Research Project reports a slightly higher proportion of gay furries based on a smaller but comparable sample size (ref). Their numbers are slightly different because some of their surveys are collected at conventions. I discuss this effect further down in this article.

There is an [adjective][species] visualization of this data available here(ref).

The Furrypoll data on furry sexual preference is especially interesting if we look at how long the respondents have been part of the furry community. It shows that a lot of furries an awful lot of furries change their sexual preference, from straight to gay, within five years of joining the community.

This shows that around 50% of heterosexuals joining the furry community will change their sexual preference, mostly towards

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[1] Source: furrypoll.com
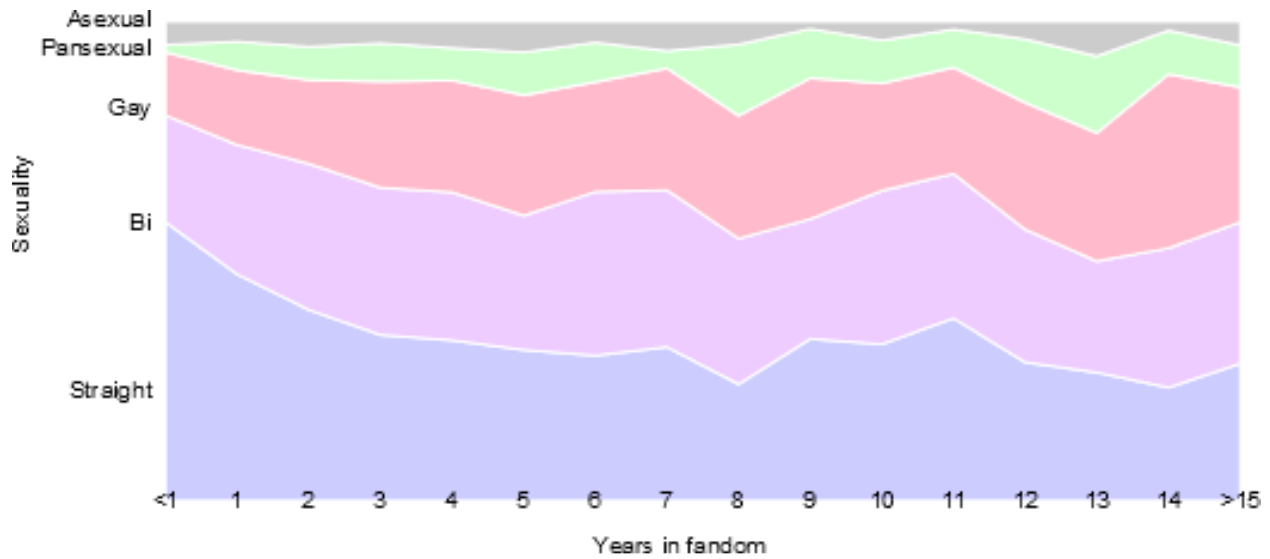
Figure 10.2: Years in the fandom vs. sexual orientation.

gay. I've written about this in detail before on [adjective][species], in an article titled Re-Evaluating Your Sexual Preference. The overall effect is that older furries are more likely to be gay.

Even with this large furry shift towards homosexuality over time, furry is still just 20 to 25% gay. However we have a lot of furries who identify as bisexual, or at least in the bisexual area of the spectrum.

Bisexuality is a difficult term to define, because it tends to mean different things to different people. For some it means that gender is irrelevant to sexual attraction, others will swing between exclusively homosexual and heterosexual phases, and for others it merely denotes that the gender of their sexual or romantic partners is variable.

Because the meaning of 'bisexual' is both reductive and variable, it's not very useful. This is a problem with a lot of terms associated with sexual orientation, gender, and identity. Unfortunately, when collecting data, we need to lump people into categories. Labelling a large portion of furry as 'bisexual' is an unavoidable simplification.

I would argue that, inside furry, an unusually large proportion of our nominal bisexuals are people who are mostly heterosexual, but who enjoy homosexual sex. This occurs because homosexual (male) sex is highly available within furry: we are male dominated, sex-positive, and homosexual activity is normal.

In this way, furry neatly mirrors the non-furry world. In the non-furry world, nominal bisexuals are more likely to be mostly homosexual people who engage in heterosexual sex. This is because heterosexual sex is more available in the non-furry world; a product of a 50/50 gender split, a relative dearth of homosexuals, and cultural homophobia.

So furry encourages situational homosexuality, just like the non-furry world encourages situational heterosexuality. (As an aside, anyone using the term 'jailhouse gay' to describe furries is being homophobic, because that term is only pejorative if you think that gay sex is 'bad' compared to straight sex.)

The preponderance of gay sex within furry probably explains why real-world furry gatherings tend to be gayer than the community as a whole. A few things happen:

- Gay furries are more likely to experience and enjoy sexual tension, real or imagined, at a furry gathering. This acts as a motivating factor.

- Straight furries who are in a relationship are less likely to have a partner who is also a furry. (Only about 20% of furries are female.) And a furry with a non-furry partner is probably less likely to socialize with the group than an all-furry couple.

- Data shows that female furries are less likely than male furries to socialize in person (see below). The dearth of women means that there is less motivation for straight (male) furries to socialize. Women are less likely to socialize for two reasons: firstly, women tend to identify less strongly as a furry (ref furrypoll.com); secondly, women in the very male-dominated furry environment are often harassed (more on this in a moment).

You can see the differences by comparing furrypoll.com data, which is collected exclusively online, with International Anthropomorphic Research Project data, which is partly collected (45%) in person at conventions.

- Proportion of women: 20% Furrypoll vs 15% IARP

- Proportion of homosexuality: 22% Furrypoll vs 29% IARP

The differences would be starker still if the IARP data were 100% from conventions.

As an aside, there is one group of furries with no doubt that there are a lot of heterosexuals at furry gatherings: women. It's common for women to be harassed, not necessarily in an overtly sexual fashion, but certainly in an unwelcome fashion. This is based on conversations I've had with women rather than any hard data: they tend to use terms like 'annoying' and 'pest' and 'don't get the hint'. Some women choose to avoid furry gatherings altogether, which is bad for everyone.

Returning to the bar in London, it's easy to see how our furry reached the mistaken conclusion that we were "all gay". Men, and gay men, were over-represented. There were plenty of heterosexual men attending that Londonfurs meet, but they were largely invisible. Furries are often assumed to be gay (or bi) unless proven otherwise. This is another inversion of the real world: at furmeets, heterosexuality is always present but largely hidden. It's easy to draw the false conclusion that it doesn't exist.

10.2 Species Selection and Character Creation

This weekend, I had the privilege of helping facilitate a panel at Rocky Mountain Fur Con 2013 surrounding the topic of species selection and character creation. The panel was a delightful discussion about the ways in which we build up the avatars we use to interact within our subculture, and why exactly it is that we choose the animal (or animals) that we become with our character (or characters).

That's not all, though. I also had the privilege of sitting down with Klisoura, [a][s] contributor of Furry Survey fame, and having not only several delightful discussions on topics as diverse as tennis balls and coyotes, but also a little impromptu hack-a-thon in the hotel lobby on the subject of species selection. This tied in well enough with the panel that some of the results of that were shown during the Q&A after the discussion, and even led to several other conversations with various different furries over dinner and the next day. The whole weekend was a blast, but I'd like to tie up some of these conversation threads and ideas into something worth showing here on [a][s].

The title of that particular panel was the same as this post, "Species Selection and Character Creation", and was intended to be something new for me, and, I felt, relatively new for the convention as well. Rather than sit behind the table at the head of the discussion room and dictate a set of ideas to an audience, my goal was to re-arrange the chairs in the room into a circle and have everyone participate evenly in a sort of Socratic-style exploration of species and avatar. However, given the hour of sleep I'd had the night before, it worked out somewhere in between. While the Socratic "asking questions to receive answers everyone already knows about themselves" part worked out pretty well, I wasn't able to make real the truly participatory experience of everyone being able to see each other. I offer this as an explanation for not simply posting the audio from the panel itself, though it was recorded. If I get around to mastering the audio well enough to make it presentable, I'll post it here and make note of it. I think it's worth a listen!

I began by asking the room full of furries why they chose the animal they did for their species, and I received a lot of answers that fit in well with my experience of the fandom. Notable among the explanations were the oft-used words 'identity', 'connection', 'personality', and 'characteristics'. And this, of course makes sense. Many introductions to furry, whether they're websites (the first introductory website I found was Captain Packrat's explanation of FurCodes) or friends, explain that although furry is about being a fan of anthropomorphism in general, it often (but not always) specifically involves a personal connection with an animal that leads to the creation of a personal character: an avatar often used in interaction with other furries.

We all know this, of course, but it's always interesting to see the data bear it out. A discussion with Klisoura prior to the panel led to an experiment: is such a thing visible in the answers provided

Figure 10.3: Husky word-cloud

by respondents to the furry survey? It turns out that it is, in its own way. On the survey, users are asked the species of their character or characters, and then given room to provide an explanation of just why they chose the species they did. Free-text answers are hard to parse down into simple one-way conclusions, and are not necessarily available to be shared as they stand. However, we can draw conclusions about the use of language itself within these answers, and in this instance, we did so by means of one of the simpler means of textual analysis: frequency counts.

We've analyzed the responses for many of the most popular species represented in the responses to the 2012 Furry Survey. Breaking this down by species not only helps us spot keywords such as mentioned above, but also helps us see where additional words, especially emotionally or spiritually charged words, are used when identifying with particular species. Let's start out with one of the easier ones, for huskies, where I can point to a few of these words in particular to explain what I mean:

Figure 10.4: Wolf word-cloud

We see our previously tagged set of words such as 'traits', 'personality', and 'always' (left in[2] because it often shows up in constructs such as "I have always felt like I was a husky"). However, we can also see several emotionally charged words such as 'love'/'loved', 'loyal', 'cute', 'playful', and 'beautiful'. These figure strongly as compared to other marked words such as 'cool', 'hard', 'submissive', and 'spiritual'. Contrasting this with the cloud for wolves shows the difference in species selection:

Here we see a shift in the tagged words to 'connection', 'identify', as well as 'personality', which I think shows a different attitude used to approach the problem of species selection when creating a character. Indeed, we see that 'spirituality' figures more strongly, along with 'pack', 'strong', 'spirit', and 'one'/'alone', while 'loyal' and 'social' are deemphasized.

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[2]The responses were cleaned of some very common words that tended to skew the word-clouds, such as articles (the, a, an), conjunctions (but, and), and the species' name and plural form of the name which, of course, show up quite often.

Figure 10.5: Dragon word-cloud

Another interesting thing to note is that, among the several species we pulled from the database, some are more strongly marked, such as the previous two, and some are not. Those who chose dragon as their species, do so for many, many different reasons than wolves or huskies.

As you can see, there is less polarization around certain terms, both emotionally marked and the previously tagged words; that is, the cloud is more homogeneous. There are a few potential reasons for this. One is the possibility that dragons have cultural ties to more than just western culture. Wolves have both a strong mythology surrounding them in the west, as well as the advantage of being important in current events, given the re-homing and conservation efforts surrounding the species in North America.

While dragons do have a mythology attached to them in the west, it's very different than their Eastern interpretations, which will lead to less strongly-marked words and phrases showing up in analysis due to a wider spread. Additionally, while dragons are certainly prominent now in fiction

words, they are not nearly as prevalent in current events outside of that setting.

These are just some examples, but I think it goes to show that there are indeed some trends, both general and specific, that go into species selection among furries. That's only part of what goes into the creation of a personal character, though, as I think we might achieve some similar results by asking ordinary people to justify their choice of their favorite animal. Thus, during the panel, we also discussed the processes of character creation, growth, and change.

One exercise that I think works well is imposing artificial restrictions. This was, after all, one of the foundations for the literary group Oulipo, of A Void fame (A Void being a book written originally in French entirely without the letter 'e', and then, perhaps even more impressively, translated into English with the same restriction in place). By imposing on ourselves restrictions, we reduce the problem of unfettered, and thus directionless, creativity. In that vein, I asked participants to describe their personal characters – fursonae, if you will – in one sentence or less. The results are telling:

My persona is a reflection of myself ahead in life which I can use as a goal.

and

My fursona is an extension of myself as I move forward in life.

Some were more verbose and specific along these lines:

It's a coping mechanism, a way to become someone else and not deal with tough times, or even provide an outside perspective on them.

and

Who I strive to become, always a step ahead of me; as I gain attributes, my character stays one step ahead of me. It is my role-model.

Some people got even more creative:

The person with whom I speak.

or

Convenient, exaggerated wish fulfillment.

or simply,

Me.

The theme of "a better version of me" was repeated quite often when discussing both the ways in which characters are created, and the ways in which they change. I really think that this reflects well on us as a subculture. A lot of my focus, when interacting with other furries, is centered around being what I see as an ideal version of myself, as well as just a fox-person. Some of that's simple and mechanical: "I wish I were able to more clearly express my ideas" and "I wish I were more glib, quippier" are both aided by social interaction through a text-based interface such as one might find online. Beyond that, however, by being able to have this version of myself that is better than me, I, as others mentioned, have something to strive for, something to grow into.

Discussion along these lines continued after the panel itself, as a few of the attendees convinced me to head out to dinner rather than straight up to bed (thanks for that, it was the first real meal of the day). While we ate, we talked about what people took away most from the panel, and also came up with a few additional ideas to help tie together the two ideas of species and character.

One thing that came up was the idea that some gentle joking about species, a sort of lamp-shading of stereotypes, helps to reinforce species identity with regards to character. Much, if not most of this, as pointed out by Klisoura later on, is self-deprecatory. This helps to forge familiarity between people, especially among members of the same subculture, or even sub-groups within that subculture. Making fun of the chase-instinct in dogs by, as my roommate (a husky) puts it, "huffing the scent of a new can of tennis balls", or the face-first pouncing of foxes lending to the overall silliness of the species helps not only to strengthen one's identity with that species but also to provide a conversational starter among friends, or friends-to-be. This can, of course, be mis-applied or simply go too far. The idea that wolves are a dime-a-dozen, or that foxes are all "sluts" are complex and sometimes self-reinforcing stereotypes that, by virtue of their being stereotypes, can rub many the wrong way and cause no small amount of offense.

We also noted another interesting conclusion from the panel. Every time I run the "Exploring the Fandom Through Data" panel, I bring up the idea of doxa – that which we accept as truth without requiring proof – and how sometimes it needs to be challenged when that which is accepted is not necessarily true. For me and several others, one aspect of doxa in particular was challenged during the convention, and it was particularly surprising that this was the case.

One of the attendees at the panel brought up the fact that, during a time of crisis, epiphany, or great change in life, sometimes one's character also goes through change (in this case, a change in species from fox to rat), in a sense reflecting external events in an extreme way. Even though several of us were surprised that such things as a turning point in life would be shown in something so fundamental as one's species, it's one of those things that makes sense upon consideration. Even looking back, for myself, the one time I truly changed species surrounded a profound change in my life. Moving to college – and all that is entailed in that, such as moving away from parents, getting a job, and so on – affected me deeply. That signified a total restructuring of my life, even

to the point where the old character I had inhabited, a red fox with two tails, the tips of which were dyed green, no longer applied. It was high-school-me. It was me-growing-up. It is not me now.

The reactions from around the room echoed my sentiment. While most were surprised and intrigued at the concept of an external factor such as a move or an epiphany having so large an effect on someone as to cause a sudden, major restructuring of their furry identity, many, myself included, confirmed that this is not infrequent. Those who were most surprised felt that a sudden crisis such as this would not lead to a major change, but rather influence the direction in which their character grew. That is, their goals would change both for them as well as their character, though aspects such as species would remain. Unfortunately, we ran low on time before we had the chance to investigate the differences in how these two rough groups dealt with their character's identity, though it is worth investigating! That there is even the trope of the species-change-journal on FA is proof of this.

As a meta-furry resource, [adjective][species] explores a lot of topics surrounding furry, though it seems of late that the focus has been on topics that happen to be ancillary to the fandom itself. These are all dreadfully interesting, I think, but so is much of the stuff at the core of our subculture, this base layer that helps make us who we are. These are the reasons we seek to meet up together at cons such as RMFC, not simply these supplementary reasons such as being ahead of or behind the rest of the world, any skews in sexual orientation or gender, or even movies about cheetahs, though they may all help. These core facets are worth exploring, as they help to form coherence among all these different animal-folk.

If you are interested in more from the panel, the notes are available here.(ref)

10.3   Species Selection and Character Creation: Follow-Up

This is just a quick follow-up with some further information about the Species Selection and Character Creation article posted last week. I normally post on Wednesdays and I had an article that could have been scheduled today, but with that article likely needing more space than this one and the desire not to distract from it with a simple addendum, I figured I'd swap the two days around and give tomorrow's real article its time as the featured post!

Last Wednesday, even as the article was going live, I was packing up my laptop for an afternoon at a coffee shop (The Alley Cat, where the phone is always answered with a personable "meow!") where I would spend a few hours talking with the inimitable Klisoura about furries and data. Among other topics (some of which will show up here on [a][s] quite soon), we poked around some of the species data a little further, and found some more interesting facts. That, combined with some input from others both on Twitter and FurAffinity, and some volunteers in private communication, got me thinking that more information is always better than less, and so here we go!

Common Terms

Over the process of exploring the data with Klisoura, we removed several common words such as the name of the species, articles such as 'a' or 'an', and so on. However, we left in many additional terms that showed variation between species as they do help show the differences in the ways in which people thought of their characters. A few of these words, such as 'love'/'loved' or 'personality' show up on every chart, of course, but at different rates, showing a stronger sense of, say, personality alignment with one species, but with a greater sense of, say, loving with another species.

However, this tends to hide some of the differences in responses that show species perception rather than character perception due to their relative prevalence. By removing these common words as well, we find that the words associated with the stereotypes or perception of a particular species are emphasized even further, and those differences made plain. Check it out below!

Additional Surveys, Visualization, and Exploration

The amount of data amassed is quite large. Current data sets include the Furry Survey from 2009 until present (though we will not be providing information from current data until the 2013 survey itself is finished), the 2012 [adjective][species] Census and Survey, and all of the [a][s] small polls

Figure 10.6: Red Foxes

and surveys, not to mention aggregated data from other sources such as the IARP and other surveys, and scrape-able data-sources which we have used in the past.

As I am fond of saying in the Exploring the Fandom Through Data panel*, exploration is a cycle of sorts: from collection of data through understanding, giving back, dialog, and back to data collection. This is a big portion of that cycle. When we pull together data from the various sources, that's a big part of the understanding stop of that cycle, just as presenting visualizations such as the word-clouds is a big part of the giving back portion. By presenting this data in a form that shows some of the story behind it, we can start a dialog between those who produce the results and those who consume them, which leads right back to the beginning: collection. This, of course, is a fancy way of saying, we invite comments and questions by posting these results freely. More than that, we love the feedback, because that's what helps drive us to ask new questions, explore new topics, and try to understand more of our subculture.

Figure 10.7: Lions

We got several responses to the last post, and I think it would be good to expose some of this process to all so that we can see what goes on in this whole cycle.

I'd like to see X species/Why didn't you do X? We have data for several species, plus several write-in answers for additional species that were not available through the check-boxes. However, as the number of respondents nears one for each given species, two things can happen to the data: it can either get skewed wildly in inappropriate directions, or it can near the normal distribution of words within any given text. For example, if we were to take this here paragraph, we'd see a fairly normal distribution of words, with a slightly higher weight on 'species', but nothing out of the norm. However, if you were to respond to your choice of species of "fox" with "fox fox fox fOX FOX FOX OH MAN I LOVE FOXES", then, as you can see, the distribution is wildly skewed toward 'fox'. This was the reason for us restricting data to the more popular species responses out there: we are more likely to see trends that

Figure 10.8: Wolves

might, in some way, represent those who respond with a given answer.

This totally jives with why I chose X/I can't understand why people would answer in such a way!
First of all, these are only general trends that express the reasons for choosing a species to represent oneself. The are hardly guides, and they often fall along social perceptions of the species in wider culture, outside of furry (thinking of wolves in a pack, speedy cheetahs, or cunning foxes is hardly out of the norm for western society). Secondly, did you take the Furry Survey? If something seems missing, it could be your response!

What about fandom perceptions that make species more appealing? I mentioned in last week's article that there were what I termed "self-reinforcing stereotypes" associated with many species. For instance, Altivo mentions those who would choose fox, husky, or horse due solely for their perceived sexual role within the fandom. This is most assuredly worth an

Figure 10.9: Coyotes

article of its own, but in brief, that is a difficult thing to measure both in the data as explored
and also in the responses to the questions asked at the Species Selection and Character Cre-
ation panel. Needless to say, we haven't forgotten about fandom-specific stereotypes as a
factor in selection, simply that the point of the article was to explore selection as a more
general topic.

Have you tried correlating against X?/What further things can be done with the data? This sen-
timent is perhaps best expressed by FA user NEXRAD in their comments on the Jack-
als/Coyotes post on FA. There is a lot – a lot – of data in all of the responses to the Furry
Survey. In fact there are a stupefying number of data points in any one year of the survey!
We can look for trends, such as we have done with the species, or model relationships based
on correlations or clustering as was suggested. All of these are possible, but they take time
and we are, for the most part, lay-critters doing the best we can outside our day jobs, and

Figure 10.10: Huskies

checking our work before sending it out into the world. (Additionally, [a][s] has some restrictions that prevented the topic from being explored further in last week's article: we try to keep our articles at about 2,000 words or under to help with readability and comprehension, and so the best place for such work is in future articles, posts, and visualizations!)

Finally, we'd like to reiterate the sentiment that has been in place with the Furry Survey for several years now. We do our best to present a fairly solid breakdown of the information provided in the surveys, but we welcome requests for larger data sets from other researchers in the future. These aren't available for direct download currently, and will take some time to anonymize and prepare, but they do exist, and the same holds true as with "more information": more eyes on that information is always better!

* Which, if everything works out okay, I should be able to provide as an updated recording soon. We have video and audio recordings from RMFC this year, and if their quality is good

Figure 10.11: Dragons

enough, we'll pull them together and put them up on Vimeo as we did last year.

Figure 10.12: Domestic Cats

10.4   Excuse Me, I Only Talk To Real Dogs

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"Welcome to the Internet. Where the men are men, the women are men, and "

Wait, what?

Hang out in the chatrooms that dot the furry landscape, and youll find this sentiment expressed not infrequently. Boiled down, it encapsulates the belief that you cant trust what you see, which is simple enough – but Ill suggest that this line of thinking is both inaccurate and also slightly troublesome.

If youre not a roleplayer, this line of discussion is all somewhat irrelevant to you. But according to the 2012 Furry Survey, more than half of furries *do* engage in roleplaying to some degree, and at some time. This probably isnt surprising; roleplaying offers a safe space to explore our identities,

Figure 10.13: Cheetahs

and it probably goes without saying that furries would gravitate towards this exploration.

It seems to be self-evident that people are willing to accept interacting with people who present themselves as a different species than they really are, and in my experience its generally accepted that ones online sexual orientation can legitimately differ from ones real-world orientation. So why is gender so problematic?

Well, first of all, what do I mean by "problematic"?

Quantitatively, we notice a strong aversion to changing ones sex online: 82% of people say that they do not do so, with a strong majority (58.5%) saying they would not do so. Even amongst active roleplayers, 74% hew strictly to the *biological sex* they were born with – that is, the remaining 18% (26% amongst roleplayers) also encapsulates the (admittedly small) number of transgendered persons who are electing to accurately represent their gender.

Qualitatively, we see statements like, "Im not a fan of people who are [girls online but] guys in

Figure 10.14: Tigers

real life" – the backronymic pejorative "GIRL" (Guy In Real Life) applies here – and it is here that we start to see one of the interesting dimensions of the issue, which is that it is expressly gendered and generally heteronormative: far fewer people seem as troubled by the idea that the male winged magic-using bipedal talking sapient fox-wolf mix theyre talking to is actually being operated by a female puppeteer.

We understand, at least to some degree, that furry chatrooms are not accurate representations of reality, as my last description indicates. In my sojourns through the fandom Ive seen people who claimed to be Russian when they were really American, people who claimed to be lawyers, people who claimed to be thin, people who claimed to have masters degrees in esoteric subjects

Its pretty much par for the course.

So whys it gender that sets people off? Why not other areas of body image? Why wouldnt you put in your profile, "I only want to talk to people who are physically fit in real life"? Possi-

Figure 10.15: Rabbits

bly because it would seem shallow, and slightly irrelevant for the purposes of light conversation, nondirected roleplay, and typefucking?

Lets examine some possible answers.

The first is that its an inherent dishonesty that is fair to judge people on. That is: if I cant trust that youre honest about such a fundamental aspect of your personality, then what can I trust you on? Is it supposed to not matter because were talking as two avatars? If were only interacting mask-on-mask, then what does anything really matter, anyway?

This seems like a logical statement, until you unpack it a bit. After all, someones real-world physical attributes are only actually relevant if you enter every conversation expecting the possibility that your interaction on FurryMUCK could logically lead to a real-world romantic or sexual encounter. Not to put too fine a point on it, but this is a weird, overbearing, and even slightly offputting mindset to start from.

We are, after all, expressly entering into an abstracted, idealized world when we engage with avatars. Even chatroom sexuality is transgressive: we gain the ability to interact free of many of the restrictions and repercussions imposed by the real world. Make the phrasing honest: "I would like to pretend to be a dog, and for you to pretend to be a red panda-lynx hybrid, and I would like to put some of my pretend bipedal clothes-wearing ambient-music-appreciating dog parts inside your pretend red-panda lynx body but *only if Id be cool doing that in real life, too.*"

As pickup lines go, its a little awkward.

A more interesting objection, though its not often phrased explicitly, is the one that boils it down to the unseemliness of straight men pretending to be women so that they can have straight sex, or to otherwise benefit from the attention they would otherwise lack.

So, then. *Fetch me the numbers, Igor!*

On the Furry Survey, I ask about presenting yourself in the fandom as a gender different from your biological sex. Five options are presented:

- No, and I would not do so

- No, but I might do so

- Yes, sometimes

- Yes, often

- My primary furry avatar fits this description

As said, 58.5% of respondents gave the first answer – that is, that they "would not" do so. When we limit the response to only straight men, that number jumps to 71.6%. A further 21.4% of straight men say they dont, but they might consider it. Straight men are a third as likely to say they do it "often" (¡1% compared to 3% in the general population), and around a quarter as likely to say their primary avatar differs from their own biological sex (1.5% compared to 5.6% in the general population).

It is here that we pause to note a couple more things about the prevalence of gender fluidity. Firstly, in a proportional sense its substantially more common amongst women; women are 2.5 times as likely to have a male primary avatar than men are to have a female one, and 2.7 times as likely to say they "often" represent themselves as a different gender. Only 37.2% of women say they "would not" use a male avatar; 64.3% of men say they "would not" use a female one.

Secondly, it would seem that since straight people are substantially less likely to do, then the slack is made up by those in other portions of the sexuality spectrum. It was suggested that partly this might be because changing genders allows you to explore your own notional homo- or bisexuality in interesting – and safe – new ways.

But this is an interesting concept, and were going to come back to it in a bit.

If we compare those who say they would not and those who say they always present themselves as a different gender, its true that there are certain evident differences. For one, as stated, people who always do so are less likely to be straight (22% vs 43%), and far more likely to be pansexual (24% vs 4%). Theyre also three times as likely to be asexual, though – 11.3% vs 3.7%. In real number terms, they make up 5.6% of the fandom, but 22% of the fandoms asexual people and more than a third of the pansexual members.

Outside of sexual orientation terms, they are also, as stated, more likely to be female. They are older, though by less than a year, and have a higher degree of education. They are 19% less likely to be single and 45% more likely to be in a long-term relationship.

Their positions on an attitudinal survey tend to be more extreme. People with gender-transgressive primary identities are 46% more likely to strongly disagree that what other people think of them is important (14.2% to 9.7%). They are 50% more likely to strongly disagree with the statement "creativity is one of my strongest attributes" (43.4% to 28.4%). They are 88% more likely to "strongly agree" that they are more talented than most of their peers (10.9% to 5.8%) – but also 55% more likely to "strongly disagree" with that statement (18% to 11.6%).

They are not appreciably likely to say that sex is more important to their furry identity (average score on 10-point scale is 4.6 vs 4.3), which circles us back to an earlier point. It may seem like I am, to a degree, harping on this, but I think its important to note that, from the evidence, people who change their gender online arent doing so for sexual reasons.

So what does it tell us if we think they are?

What first drew me to this topic was how closely the discussion recalls classic and unfortunate interactions transgendered individuals are familiar with. As I said to start with, because the question discusses presenting an avatar different from your biological sex, a small number of those people are transgendered persons – but most of them are not, and I am certainly not going to suggest that gender dysphoria is the primary motivation.

But, in furry chatrooms and roleplaying environments, you see the same classic scripts playing out. You see the same troubling, parochial belief in "traps" – people who are disingenuously trying to mislead straight men into a life of well, certainly a life of something, anyway, and evidently something more problematic than simply pretending to be a tiger. You see the same stigma attached to gender transgressiveness, particularly in the notion that people make the choices they do because they would be relationship-unsuccessful otherwise (a statement that is demonstrably incorrect).

You even see hints of "trans panic," with people discovering "the truth" about their conversational partners attacking them, belittling them, and engaging in other behaviors that are designed to reinforce a gender-normative worldview. I ran a roleplaying chatroom for nine years, and I cannot count the number of times, as a moderator, I had someone breathlessly "out" someone to me.

"Oh, bloody hell," you are sighing into your scotch. You wave the waiter over to bring you your check, shaking your head and muttering: "Here they go on about transphobia again."

Well.

Yeah.

Im willing to call this out because, as I said, it seems to be equally parts silly and troubling. I have yet to see a clear articulation of why it should be acceptable to change your species but not your sex that doesnt boil down to balky circumlocutions around the fundamental issue that people still see gender as immutable and transgenderism as the slightly skeevy hallmark of second-class persons.

That is to say, I dont see a clear articulation that doesnt either hem and haw around that issue or reveal a hell of a lot more about the speaker than youd initially suspect. As I said, your conversational partners real-world gender is dubiously crucial if you enter into conversations expecting the possibility that you intend to engage with them in real-life sexual contexts, but thats a can of worms all on its own.

As the New Yorkers Peter Steiner once famously quipped: "on the Internet, nobody knows youre a dog." Anonymous communication involves striking a careful balance between respecting the freedom that comes from constructed identity, and being aware of the assumptions we make in our interactions with others.

Its clearly something that were uncomfortable with: anonymity invites its own destruction, and the Internet takes a singular pride in denying of others the right to be anonymous, or to choose on their own terms what they present. And when gender roles come into play, we run headlong into traditional discomfort with people who dont play by the rules. Hence the invention of new stereotypes, irrespective of whether they are actually accurate – and I have no doubt that some of you who have gotten this far are thinking: yeah, but I know people like that.

Perhaps.

But these seem to be edge cases, and the thing that strikes me about the dim eye turned on those with gender-transgressive identities is that casual chauvinism is still chauvinism, and bears reflection. The fandom has an established and positive legacy of being supportive of all types of self-exploration. How peculiar – and slightly sad – it would be if this is one of the last to enjoy the legitimacy of existing unexamined and uncriticized.

Because in all probability, insisting you will only talk to real dogs is a losing game, of dubious reward.

10.5   Meet The Babyfurs

Babyfurs are a significant part of the furry community, but they tend to exist below the surface. It's common for babyfurs to create two identities: a clean identity for use in the furry community at large, plus a second identity for socializing with the babyfurs. So there isn't much leakage from the babyfurs into the furry mainstream.

The babyfurs that are visible within furry largely fall into one of two categories: the charismatic types who are able to express their babyfur nature without it overwhelming their identity; and the laissez-faire, who are overt and often less-than-subtle. The rest of the babyfurs, the silent majority, are staying hidden.

There is a dilemma for this silent babyfur majority, those who want to express their identity honestly but choose to moderate such expressions in the furry mainstream. On one hand, they would like to be open; on the other, they don't want to be subject to abuse.

And there is a lot of abuse aimed towards babyfurs from the furry mainstream. Most people reading this will be aware of the stereotypical antisocial babyfur, and will probably have heard some second-hand horror story about something that happened at a convention that one time.

Happily, I'm here to report that the stereotypes are wrong. The mainstream treatment of babyfurs is unfair and largely unfounded. This article is about the real babyfurs.

A few weeks ago, [adjective][species] published an article titled How To Be A Babyfur. In this article I investigated some of the challenges facing babyfurs, but the main point was an attached survey. The survey was shared around by babyfurs on the usual social networks, and (at the time of writing) we had 351 responses. My thanks to those who participated, particularly those who took the time to provide some extra comments. I learned a lot.

We've collated the results. While the data isn't statistically significant, it shows some clear trends. I've read through the various extra comments, and I've followed up with a few extra questions for some respondents. I believe I have enough information to write a brief but broad summary of the group. Ladies, gentlemen, in-betweens meet the babyfurs:

1. Babyfurs Are Indistinguishable From Regular Furries

(All comparison data is taken from Furrypoll.com.)

The median age of the babyfurs is 24, compared with 22 for all furries. This difference is insignificant, and easily explained by the fact that [a][s] probably attracts a slightly older audience. The babyfur age distribution looks like the furry age distribution: a group of people around age 20 with a long tail. The youngest babyfur respondent was 14; the oldest 55.

- The babyfurs are about 80% male, the same proportion as all furries.

- The babyfurs are gayer: 44% compared with 22% for all furries.

This is an expected result: men are kinkier than women, and there is a sexual element to the babyfur identity for many (but not all). More on this later.

- About two-thirds of babyfurs live in North America. The remainder are spread about the usual furry hotspots: Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Australasia.

Those from non-English-speaking nations are undoubtedly under-represented, because the article and survey are in English. Population data from an online survey is always subject to significant error so I won't present any comparison data, but in general this result is similar to what I'd expect for the overall furry group.

2. Babyfurs Are Very Social

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that babyfurs are social beasts. As expected, a large majority socialize in babyfur communities online (83%), however there is also a lot of in-person socializing: a full 55% of babyfurs have attended a real-world babyfur event, and 34% have attended a non-furry AB/DL (Adult Baby/Diaper Lover) event.

Very clearly the stereotype of babyfurs as being socially-averse is false. The babyfurs that are poorly socialized are simply the easiest ones to spot. (Thus invoking JM's Law: the most visible members of a minority are rarely the best ambassadors.)

3. Babyfurs Like To Wear Diapers

This may sound rather obvious, but results show essentially universal agreement: babyfurs are wearing diapers. It is fair to say that "babyfur" is synonymous with "furry diaper lover".

The term "babyfur" is actually a bit of a misnomer, because many babyfurs do not engage in ageplay, or anything else that called be called babyish. Which brings me to

4. There Is A Minor Schism Between Ageplaying Babyfurs and Diapers-Only Babyfurs

As far as conflict, aka furry drama (TM) goes, this one is very minor. Everyone seems to be happy enough to be lumped together in the broad category titled "babyfur", however there are clearly two main subgroups.

Those who like to wear diapers, but don't engage in ageplay, often prefer to be called "diaperfurs". This is an important point (thanks to those who pointed it out), although use of the "diaperfur" term is not universal among diapers-only babyfurs. Some are happy to be labelled babyfurs; others see a big difference, to the point that some weren't sure whether the article and survey were intended for diaperfurs as well as ageplaying babyfurs. (It was.)

Conversely, some ageplaying babyfurs prefer to be called "kidfurs" or "littlefurs", which indicates that their babyfur identity is age-regressive. I suspect that the special delineation is largely for convenience, because it helps likeminded ageplayers identify one another more easily. There are also some furries who play as caretakers towards the ageplayers, as either an occasional or permanent preference.

The two groups seem to get along well, and nobody seems to mind being collected under the babyfur banner. Given the important difference separating the two groups, I think that the overall spirit of fellowship is rather generous.

The ageplayers have a special challenge: they are flirting with one of society's great taboos, the sexualization of underage characters. For many babyfurs, ageplay has a sexual component, an interest that (partly) drives demand for cub porn. And this association sees some furs make an easy but completely unfounded leap: they accuse babyfurs of paedophilia.

The vague association of ageplay with paedophilia is one reason why some diaperfurs don't like the babyfur term. It's not because they think that there is any connection, just that they know that some people make that connection, and that they'd rather not be tarred with that particular brush.

The connection between ageplay and paedophilia is wrong. But it's an easy connection to make. I can think of one case where a furry convicted of paedophilia-related crimes turned out to be a babyfur, and I think that it's reasonable to guess that furry paedophiles are fairly likely to be babyfurs. However the correlation only works in one direction: it doesn't mean that an ageplaying babyfur is likely to be paedophile.

Consider that violent criminals are likely to enjoy violent video games. But people who enjoy violent video games are not likely to become violent criminals.

For the doubters: if you are uncomfortable with cub porn, or feel that there must be some correlation between ageplay and paedophilia, please (1) consider that people don't choose their sexual interests, and (2) read my article from last year, In Defence Of Cub Porn.

It's a controversial topic, and not one I want to explore in any detail here. It's only tangentially relevant to the subject at hand, and I think it risks overwhelming the main points. Suffice to say that it is false to suggest that ageplayers are doing something wrong'. Which brings me to

5. Babyfurs Are Unfairly Demonized

The babyfur group as a whole – ageplayers, diaperfurs, and the rest – are routinely accused of being anti-social or having poor hygiene. The stories are often exaggerated, and usually completely false.

One astute babyfur noted that watersports is a relatively visible fetish within the furry community. While watersports fetishists are subject to a certain degree of kink-shaming, they are far less likely to be demonized in the way that babyfurs are. I can only surmise that diapers suggest age regression (regardless of whether of not ageplay is taking place), giving diapers a faint whiff of the taboo.

I'll add that unfair demonization of babyfurs occurs, to an extent, within the babyfur community itself. Some diaperfurs unfairly dislike ageplayers, much in the same way that some furries unfairly dislike babyfurs as a whole.

There are, of course, some bad eggs. Every group, including the furry community, has some outliers.

One of the (intelligent, moderate) commenters on my article reposted some comments to a Fur Affinity journal[3]. Here's part of a comment he received, from a user named Bondagepup:

> Having to smell someone's stale piss-pants in public is also not the end of the world. Ever been in public? People smell. (Old people especially.) Just hold your nose and move on people.

Bondagepup argues that he's merely expressing himself, and that he should be free to do so:

> Lastly, just a note to anyone who is offended by seeing anything they deem sexual in a public setting, your moral code is not law. Just because you were taught that sex was naughty and needs to be hidden doesn't mean it's true.

Bondagepup thinks he's being laissez-faire and sex-positive, and he is to a degree. However he is also forcing people around him to engage in his sexual fetish. Sex columnist and ethicist Dan Savage sums up the problem with public fetish play nicely. (I have edited this quote for clarity, you can read the advice in full here):

> Asking people to accept your pastime doesn't give you the right to force other people to take part in it. That's not asking for tolerance, that's demanding participation. And that's not okay.
>
> Not once in our struggle for social acceptance have gays and lesbians demanded the right to have sex in front of our relatives. We want to be accepted by our families,

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[3]http://www.furaffinity.net/journal/4877653/

tolerated by strangers, and treated equally by our government. But people who don't want to watch us have sex aren't compelled to.

This fetish stuff is, at bottom, about sex.

Keep the heavy stuff behind closed doors and keep it subtle when you're out in public. That's not oppression, that's common courtesy.

Bondagepup is being anti-social. There is nothing wrong with discreetly wearing diapers (or anything else) in public, but there is plenty wrong with being actively smelly. He is reinforcing the negative babyfur stereotype, to the detriment of the babyfur community as a whole.

The overwhelming majority of babyfurs are discreet. They are not noticed by the mainstream because they are respectful of those around them, and because they understand the boundaries of reasonable behaviour.

As ever, the most visible members of a minority are rarely the best ambassadors.

Consider this final statistic: only 35% of babyfurs have ever taken the simple, reasonable step of displaying a babyfur conbadge. Which means that there are two (or so) stealthy babyfurs for each conbadge you see. Next time you're at a convention, take a headcount.

10.6   Submissive Roles: Writing for Furry Anthologies

Writing in the furry fandom is seen as the poor relation to art, and there are plenty of articles discussing why that is so. Here's where we writers score over the artists, though: the pool of furry authors is tiny by comparison, and you could count those operating at a professional level on the pads of one paw. The downside: the market, and the rewards, are correspondingly small. However, most creative furries, whatever form their art takes, get started out of love for the craft, and because they have stories to tell, rather than in the hope of fame and financial reward.

Many furry fiction writers cut their teeth on fanfiction (*The Lion King*, in my case) before moving on to tales of original characters posted on Fur Affinity or SoFurry. Although the internet provides a way to get your work in front of a huge number of people, from all over the world, in a matter of moments, some of us still crave an appearance in traditional print publication.

One way to make the leap from screen to page is to contribute a short story to a furry anthology. Based on my own experience, I'll describe about how to go about it, how the process works, and the pros and cons of anthology writing.

An anthology is a collection of short works – fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or a mixture – by a number of authors. It can be a one-off special or a regular annual publication, like *Heat* and *New Fables*, both published by Sofawolf Press. Anthologies may have a generalised theme (*Heat* is for romantic or erotic works of all kinds) or a more specific one, like Sofawolf's *X*, whose stories are each based on one of the Ten Commandments.

Anthology editors solicit contributions by putting out a call for submissions, which will include guidelines for the type of story required and a submission deadline. These days, you will usually be asked to submit by email rather than posting a physical manuscript.

Editors are as keen to receive material as writers are to get it published, but it can still be difficult to find open calls for submissions. Keep an eye on the websites of furry publishers – Sofawolf, Furplanet and Rabbit Valley – as well as the Paying Venues page of the Furry Writers' Guild. Following writers and editors on Twitter or keeping up with their blogs will also give you an idea of what's happening in the world of publishing. Established writers may even be contacted by the editor and asked to contribute a story. That's a pretty big compliment. (Still waiting, guys!)

The good news is that a small pool of active writers means a greater chance of acceptance. But it's likely there will still be many more submissions than slots, so how do you improve your chances of getting in?

First and foremost, follow the guidelines. That means a final word count somewhere between the minimum and maximum, if specified; obeying any requests for particular file types, margin sizes, or fonts; keeping within any specified themes or restrictions; and submitting before the

deadline. This all sounds like common sense, and it is. But you will be putting yourself ahead of the pack straight away, simply by reading and following the rules.

Writing something truly original is a good way to get your work noticed. Granted, this is a bit of a tall order. But if an anthology themed around fairy tales receives twelve stories based on Red Riding Hood, only one or two are going to make it in no matter how brilliant the rest. Avoid plot clichs unless you can give them a really good twist, and read as widely as you can in the genre so you don't accidentally come up with something too similar to an existing work.

Before submitting, get a friend to read through your story. Whether or not they're a writer, they will be able to tell you what does and doesn't work for them, and spot the kind of typing and grammatical errors that slip past computer spellcheckers. Fresh eyes will also be better than yours at spotting plot holes, or character names that change halfway through.

When you're ready to submit, include a short covering letter with your story. Sometimes the call for submissions will tell you what information is required; if not, give your name, a brief synopsis of the piece, and any other writing credits. Usually you'll receive a brief acknowledgement to let you know your email has arrived safely.

What happens next? A lot of waiting – during which you keep yourself busy writing the next thing and refrain from bothering the nice editor – followed by either acceptance or rejection. (There is a third option, in which the anthology simply never materialises for one reason or another. It's a shame, but it happens.)

Rejection is disappointing but doesn't have to be a disaster. If the editor has taken time to include critique, then treasure it, even if it makes painful reading, and think about putting any suggestions into practice next time.

Sometimes the story just isn't right for the publication, or is too similar to another submission. Try submitting elsewhere. Stories that didn't quite make the grade can be rewritten or revised before dispatch to a different publication. Still not quite there? Post to your SoFurry or FA account as a freebie.

Even if you decide your story isn't fit for public consumption after all, chances are that something can be salvaged from the wreckage and recycled for use elsewhere whether it's a plot point, a character, or a particularly good piece of dialogue. At the very least, words exist now that didn't before you wrote them. With every word, and every rejection, you're practising and improving your skills, both in writing and in *being a writer*.

When your story is accepted, it's a wonderful feeling. Allow yourself to bask and gloat; you've earned it. But what happens when the glow has worn off a little?

A few weeks or months later, you will probably be asked to revise your story in a few small ways suggested by the editor. You may approve all changes straight away or you may want to argue for your original version. The process can be as quick as approving placement of an apostrophe,

as complicated as writing a whole new scene, or as heartbreaking as deleting one. Once both you and the editor are happy with the final version, you'll sign a contract, either electronically or on paper to be posted back.

More waiting follows, this time for publication day. You should receive a contributor copy or two ahead of release to the general public. When the anthology launches, it's time for you to promote it – on your blog or website, Facebook, Twitter, and perhaps by posting an extract to your favoured furry art site (best to check with the editor first).

There are plenty of advantages to writing for anthologies. If you're the kind of writer who has difficulty actually sitting down and writing – like most of us – a cold hard deadline can be a big help. Brainstorming ideas to suit a theme can be inspirational, too, taking your muse in new directions.

During the publishing process you'll gain experience of the editorial system, and start to build relationships with editors which will stand you in good stead when it's time to pitch your novel.

Many writers find publicising their work much harder than the act of writing itself, since we're a bunch of self-doubting introverts. Appearing in an anthology immediately increases the potential audience, with all the contributors plugging the book to their friends, families and blog readers. If a big-name author is involved, their fans will probably pick the anthology up as a matter of course. All this means an anthology credit is a great way to get your work, and your name, in front of new readers.

Finally, one entirely self-serving advantage: contributor copies mean you get to read other writers' work for free.

There is a downside to anthology writing, too. The pay tends to be small, whether it's a flat or per-word rate, and may even be nonexistent, with contributor copies the only reward. Themes, deadlines and word counts can be restrictive as well as inspirational. You may find yourself disagreeing with the editor over requested changes.

To sum up the disadvantages, an anthology represents an editor's vision, not yours. It's not your baby and you have no or little control over the layout, price, font, or, where applicable, the artist chosen to illustrate your work. But if your ultimate ambition is to publish a full-length work or story collection of your very own, writing for anthologies can help to build invaluable experience, contacts, and even a fanbase.

Chapter 11

September

There is a display of religious pamphlets outside Liverpool Street station, which I pass on my stroll into work each morning. A recent pamphlet title: Pornography: Harmless or Toxic?.

The pamphlets are being peddled by Jehovah's Witnesses, a well-funded American-based group that attempts to practise Christianity as it was 2000 years ago. They are probably best known for refusing all blood transfusions, including those that might be life-saving, because "the Bible prohibits health treatments or procedures that include occult practices" (ref jw.org).

I, like most people who don't subscribe to the JW's very special brand of stupidity, am pro-pornography. So I think to myself "pornography is harmless". But I'm wrong, because I can immediately think of examples where pornography is harmful. And so I wonder if the JW's might be on to something. (Spoiler: they are not.)

I've been caught into a logical bind because I've tacitly accepted the premise of their question. They have cleverly phrased their title, drawing on a trick used by salesmen and interviewers everywhere: by offering up two competing categories, people are drawn towards one or the other.

And so it is with the title of this article: Are You An Introvert or an Extrovert? You, dear reader, almost definitely chose "introvert". You did that because I wanted you to. In reality, the label of "introvert" can be a harmful one, and it is probably a label you should reject. Let me explain why.

Labels are useful things because they help us understand ourselves, and help us explain ourselves to other people. On the downside, they do not always allow for nuance or change.

We furries like to label ourselves. We often do so in an online profile, perhaps in a Twitter bio or Fur Affinity userpage. I encourage you to take a look at your own labels before you continue.

Here's my profile, which I wrote, from the [a][s] About page:

> 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 [adjec-

tive][species] from London, where he is most commonly spotted holding a pint and talking nonsense.

I've labelled myself three times. I am a horse-of-all-trades, commonly spotted holding a pint, and commonly spotted talking nonsense.

I know that labels are important, and so I've refrained from being too direct. "A horse of all-trades" is pretty vague, and my other two labels are qualified with "commonly spotted"; they are things that I do, not things that I am.

Now let's look at Kyell Gold's [a][s] profile:

> 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.

Kyell is much more direct. He has applied three strong labels to himself: fox, writer, and California resident. I suspect that these terms are internalized, which means that Kyell considers them to be part of his identity.

A "fox" is a good label, because Kyell is free to make and remake himself in that image. A few weeks ago, Makyo and Klisoura did some datamining and published the results here on [a][s], exploring the words that people use when describing their fursona. As you might expect, they vary considerably, although there are some trends. When foxes describe themselves, the most common terms include cunning, sly, and cute. And so we can guess that Kyell might use such terms to describe himself, but in the end he will have a unique relationship with his foxly self.

I'm not sure that "writer" is a good label for Kyell. It's certainly accurate, but this might change in the future. If Kyell were to, say, experience an extended bout of writer's block, he might find this label—this identity—to be problematic. How often does Kyell have to write for him to identify as a writer?

The same goes for "California resident". Again, it's mostly accurate, but what if circumstance sees Kyell spend an extended period of time out-of-state? This label may be a mere statement of fact rather than important to Kyell's identity, although I wonder if Kyell the Oregonian would feel quite right.

When a label becomes part of your identity, it can be limiting. Kyell, for example, might be inclined to turn down an otherwise positive relocation to Oregon, because it could force him to rethink his own identity. A bad label can be self-limiting, and it can provoke an identity crisis.

To use an example that isn't Kyell, consider a brand new furry who considers himself to be straight. Let's call him Straightfox. Straightfox finds furry to be an environment that doesn't have society's stigma on homosexuality, and he—like so many of us before—is interested. But Straightfox, because of his identity as heterosexual, has a problem. He can either:

1. Refuse to participate in any homosexual activity, or;

2. Rethink his identity.

Neither of these options are easy for Straightfox. Those many, many furries who re-evaluated their sexual preference after discovering furry (a group which includes me) know how difficult it can be. Straightfox, like all before him, would have been better off if he never considered his sexual orientation to be important to his identity.

There are similar problems if you identify as an "introvert". It's an attractive label, but it's self-limiting.

"Introvert" is an attractive label because it's in opposition to the unattractive label "extrovert". If asked to conjure a mental image of an extrovert, most people will think of someone acting like a Dallas Cowboy in the 1990s: hyper-social, overbearing, and lacking any sort of introspection or internal narrative.

Furries are especially prone to this because we tend to be analytical, with lively inner lives. Furries are thoughtful, creative, and often a touch depressive. It's easy to look at other people, especially other people in a social environment, and wonder if they have any personal doubts and fears. It's easy to conclude "I'm not an extrovert like all these people".

Extroversion, then is about actions, especially social actions. And introversion becomes a label about inner thoughts. We, each of us, know that social actions make us anxious and uncomfortable and scared. Everyone else, even a coked-up Dallas Cowboy in the 1990s, is also anxious and uncomfortable and scared. But we aren't privy to anyone inner world except our own.

(As an aside, I think that there is a clue to the furry condition here. We are a group of individuals who are prone to feeling alienated from society. This doesn't mean that we are necessarily rejected by the world, it means that we are made to feel as if we are different from those around us; as if we were a different species.)

Someone who identifies as an introvert is tacitly accepting the premise that they derive limited enjoyment from social activity. They may decide that the stress of socializing always overwhelms the positive aspects, or that they simply do not have the social knack. Both of these may be true, but such an identity doesn't allow for nuance or personal growth.

In reality, social skills improve with practice. Nobody enjoys small talk; nobody finds small talk natural. But we engage in it because it provides a non-aggressive entry to conversation, and we get better at it with time. Someone who thinks they are introverted might assume that they will always fail at small talk, and so they stop trying, and never learn the skill.

The marketing world has picked up the popularity of "introvert" as a label. It's now a sales pitch, along the lines of "if you are introverted then you must read these three tips on how to

improve relationships with your workmates". It's the same marketing premise as diet books, except that it's aimed to the socially anxious rather than the body-conscious.

Here are a few examples, all books marketed towards people who label themselves as an introvert. Notice how the titles encourage you to identify as an introvert, by suggesting that "everyone else" is an extrovert:

- Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking

- Introvert Power: Why Your Inner Life is Your Hidden Strength

- The Introvert Advantage (How To Thrive In An Extrovert World)

- Introvert's Way: Living a Quiet Life in a Noisy World

- Quiet Influence: The Introvert's Guide to Making a Difference

- Energized: An Introvert's Guide to Effective Communication

And the books marketed towards extroverts? There aren't any. Nobody identifies as an extrovert. Not even a Dallas Cowboy in the 1990s.

The supposed dichotomy between introversion and extroversion is false. They are not mutually exclusive; you do not need to "choose one". In my Jehovah's Witness example, pornography is not always harmful or always toxic; there are elements of both. Similarly we are all introspective to some degree; we are all social beings to some degree.

Labels are important, but "introvert" is a bad one. You can be introspective without undermining your ability to socialize.

11.1 Communitas: Liminality, Marginality, and Outsidership

The idea that furry is a slice of ordinary society is one well worth keeping in mind. I wrote about it as my very first article on this site, even. It's important to consider the ways in which we, as furries, are not somehow separate from the rest of the world; furry does not take place in a vacuum, as I believe I've said before. We are all members of our own social structures both within and without this subculture, and it's that mixture of individualities and social ideals that belong to its members that help to make us who we are as a fandom

The very phrase 'social structures', however, is telling, in that that is precisely what some of us seek to escape by means of our membership to this social group: structure. For many, furry is seen as something apart from the social structures that surround them in their day-to-day lives. That has come up several times before here, of course. I wrote about leadership in a decentralized subculture, and JM and I have both written about the intersection of furry and the wider cultures to which we belong, both in terms of conformity and non-conformity. This puts us in something of an interesting – and ever-changing – space, as furries. We exist somewhat apart from the wider cultural contexts of which we are a part, though at the same time we cannot escape the connections entirely, for they inform a large portion of the way our own social group works.

This tension between conformity and non-conformity, belonging and not belonging, being a part of society or rejecting it, is a type of liminality, exiting between states, on the threshold, and certainly worth taking a moment to explore.

Let's take a step back and figure out what liminality is, along with the closely related concept of marginality. Liminality (from the Latin word limen, meaning threshold) began as an anthropological term to describe the process of ritual, wherein those involved enter as part of the social structure, become something separate outside of but on the threshold of that structure, before returning to society. This can easily be seen in a simple ritual which has continued until today such as marriage: those who are to be married enter as separate people, and through the process of ritual, are socially, even legally, set aside from the social structure during the ceremony, before they are re-inducted back into society, this time as a single social (and often legal) unit.

I noticed this myself recently with my own civil union ceremony: JD and I entered as two separate people, and then, even though we were simply signing papers for five or ten minutes, we entered a ritual sort of liminality where we were not separate, but not together – one step removed from society – before we were welcomed back by the county clerk as a single, legally recognized couple, complete with an announcement that got a small round of applause from the few others in the room.

At that point, following Victor Turner's definition, we were liminars: liminal entities wrapped up in the process of ritual. However, the concept of liminality has been extended beyond the idea of ritual in several ways since then. This delightful essay describes the ways in which the concept can be and has been applied outside the context of ritual. Liminal states are all around us, and a regular part of life. The author of the essay takes liminality far beyond the ritual, as have others, and elevates it to state valid in life, or even within aspects of life. There are ways in which we are betwixt and between that tie into our lives quite a bit, setting us somewhat apart from society into a sort of anti-structure.

This anti-structure, as a lack of the wider social structure, is described as communitas, which is a social anti-structure that places emphasis on humanity, equality, and togetherness rather than the hierarchies and strictures of society's more standardized forms. This is evident in many social movements, such as feminism and the gay rights movement, where, by virtue of this status of being set apart, elements of – if not all of – social structure are set aside in favor of communitas: a sense of "we're all in this together" and yet "we're still all human."

In some sense, then, liminality is very similar to marginality, and there are certainly discussions worth having on both subjects, but I think it's important to first differentiate between marginality and liminality as outsidership. I mentioned in the previous paragraph that this often happens with social movements, and I think that this shows a good example of marginality, in a way. Those at the edges of society who, by their very existence, are set apart from society in some way experience outsidership just as those in a liminal, between state do. However, there is an important distinction to be made, and that's one of choice. While liminality is often a something that one can choose to take part in – the author of the aforementioned article chose to accept his job in a foreign country, setting himself up in a state of not-quite-beloning to both his native, western culture as well as the Korean culture in which he was embedded – whereas marginality, as a social sciences term, generally refers to those statuses which place one outside of social structures through no choice of their own, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and so on.

Of course, I'm sure you can see where I'm going with all of this. In a way, furry itself, like many subcultures, is a form of outsidership, and thus something of a liminal space. We experience our own communitas within the fandom, and I think this is evident in a few notable ways.

The characters that we create for ourselves are, in a way, liminars – items betwixt and between the two worlds of the imaginary and the real. Yes, they are fictional constructs to many of us. There is no Makyo, per se, only Matthew Scott and this idea of Makyo. And yet they are expressed in the real world in several different ways. Art, fursuits, role-play, and even just plain talking about characters (as in the species selection and character creation panel at RMFC) is a way in which we bring them closer to what we consider real. They are on the threshold of both purely imaginary and totally real.

On a similar note, conventions are another good example, and a more complex one at that. Cons are liminal spaces, wherein we, as a subculture, experience our communitas more completely than perhaps we might outside of them. We try to build the world that we want Furry to be for a few short days, and we often do a pretty good job of it. One of the aspects of communitas that I find interesting is that, by virtue of this anti-structure, even leaders are still members, and so it is in most cases with con staff and board: they are furries there to enjoy the convention as well. And yet all of this takes place in the middle of San Jose, or Pittsburgh, or Magdeburg. All around the convention, keeping us from transitioning entirely to some other, more furry state, is the rest of a bustling city that is not partaking in this communitas (and indeed, often rejects it outright).

This applies to time as well as the space around conventions. While conventions get closer to Turner's ritual definition of liminality, a ritual setting aside of social structures in favor of communitas, so to does the ritual of traveling to and from conventions. This year, on the way to Further Confusion, I just happened to run into a few furries by pure chance in the San Francisco airport. We even wound up on the same train down to San Jose together. This, and so many experiences like it, help to show the ritual nature of travel, the setting aside into a space not quite society, where hierarchies are blurred and you're all just Passengers, Travelers, or Pilgrims.

As I mentioned before, however, subcultures are their own kind of outsidership. All of these things are not strictly furry, not even the conventions. Any other group that gathers around a central idea such as this has the chance to set themselves apart and yet still on the threshold, in that between space. The anime culture has their own conventions, interests, and communitas, as do so many other social groups out there.

So how has furry changed over time?

A curious question that came up in the process of researching this post is that, while it's understandable that the difference between marginality and liminality is one of choice, how exactly that choice works. That is, are there aspects of marginality to our fandom? Is it marginal to be into something by virtue of personality, or not understand the outsidership role interest plays in our lives? This is a question that JM has touched on before, and I think it's worth at least a look.

In some ways, geek culture as a whole, but also our furry subculture, has been making a slow shift from marginality to liminality. No small amount of words have been spilled over the topic of how nerds are in, it's chic to be geek, et cetera ad nauseum. However, that it is so obvious is, I think, a sign of the roles that interest play in choice. Is it a choice to participate in a subculture such as this? Of course. One need not partake in the social aspects of interest to simply be interested. Is interest a choice though? That is a tougher question, I think, and I would hesitate to say so. It shows, then, that as participation increases, the liminal aspects of interest – those based around choosing outsidership – grow in their perceived importance, even as the marginal aspects – those based around having outsidership forced upon one – shrink.

This is simple membership draw, of course, and nothing mystical, but interesting all the same, notably in the ways in which one reacts to having one's outsidership acknowledged, or even challenged. There is a great lead into this article about what it means to have sexual orientation (a marginal state for some) acknowledged, and I think that similar reactions can be seen in furry. The ways in which we reacted to MTV's Sex2k episode, or the Salon article are different than the ways in which we react to Maxim's recent nod to furries, and I think that, too, is a sign of us feeling less marginal and more liminal: it's easier to feel proud of outsidership that is freely chosen, because, to us, that outsidership is eminently enjoyable, or even a core part of our lives.

This brings me to my standard conclusion (since I've already tackled "is it furry?"): what does this get us? Liminality is a part of life, whether we notice it or not. Often we do not, but it does form a core of who we are: the ability to step outside, to gather in this communitas with our equals, and to set ourselves outside social structure on the threshold of real and imaginary, even if only for a time. Intentional liminality such as membership in a subculture can help or harm depending on the individual and how it's used, of course. We all know of the trope of the furry so entrenched in the fandom that they cannot hold down a job, pay bills, or interact well in social situations outside of furry by virtue of their membership. However, furry is certainly of incredible importance to a great many of us, and the form of escapism involved in it is hardly unhealthy. We've created ourselves a space neither here in society at large, nor, by necessity, there, in this fictional world of our zoomorphized selves. It's a safe space, a space of communitas, that draws us in.

11.2   Are You an Introvert or an Extrovert: The Quiz

Last week I wrote an article titled Are You an Introvert or an Extrovert? It was written partly in response to a new definition of introvert that has cropped up in the last five years or so, where introverts are loosely defined as people who 'gain energy' when alone and 'expend energy' when around other people.

It's a compelling way of looking at things, and it's helped people shift books with titles like *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking.* The author of that book (Susan Cain) gave a TED talk exploring the idea, and it's been loosely adapted into webcomics and other sharable media. It has been a successful meme.

People find it easy to identify as an "introvert" using this new definition. My article was about how such self-diagnosis can be harmful, but I don't want to repeat myself here. I think that labels are important, but that some labels are damaging. (Previously, I tackled another potentially harmful label, which is also subject to rampant self-diagnosis within the furry community, in an articled titled No, You Don't Have Asperger's.)

In my enthusiasm to talk about labels and self-identity, I failed to define what "introvert" actually means. This article remedies that oversight, and talks about how introversion ties into the furry condition. And, yes, there is a simple one-question quiz at the end which will help you understand where you sit on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

In general, introversion is a tendency to be internally focussed, as opposed to externally focussed. So if you are lost, consulting a map would be an introverted act, whereas asking for directions would be an extroverted act. People who are introverted can be shy (and extroverted people can be outgoing) but this is not always the case.

Modern psychology uses a personality model that originated with our good friend Karl Jung. Personalities are measured using a model called the Big Five, which considers there to be five key, measurable personality traits, one of which is Extraversion[1]. People fall somewhere on a spectrum, with "very introverted" and "very extroverted" at the extremes.

Anyway. Deep breath.

Researchers prefer the Big Five because the measured personality traits (of a single person) don't change much with mood, time of day, or any other factor. People change in personality up to about age 30, and are pretty much fixed beyond that point. (Clinical research on personality is

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[1]Blame America Dept.: In American English (which is the basis of Big Five jargon), "extrovert" and its derivatives are spelt[2] with an "a", as in "extravert". I accept that there are spelling differences in American English (and that American English is often more logical) but why oh why change "extrovert" but not "introvert"? It makes no sense.

underway with furries as well: the International Anthropomorphic Research Project uses the Big Five.)

The Big Five has replaced Myers-Briggs as the personality model du jour, but the difference is only really important if you're a researcher. Most people are more familiar with Myers-Briggs (that's the one that tells you you're INTP, or whatever), and there are a lot of simple, free, multiple-choice Myers-Briggs quizzes hosted around the internet (like here). These quizzes are reasonably useful: no substitute for an assessment by a professional, but better than, say, a quiz on OkCupid titled *Which Power Ranger Are You?*

None of these personality models make any reference to gaining/expending energy in social/non-social situations. The idea that an introvert, say, expends energy in social situations and then must 'recharge' has nothing to do with personality, as least from a scientific point of view.

We humans are social beings. Yet socializing, or even being around people, can be stressful. Non-verbal communication is a huge part of the social experience, and we rely on body language and other subtle social cues, which require mental processing and accordingly a lot of conscious and unconscious effort. It can be exhausting, and it's worse if we're somewhere unfamiliar, or if we're feeling anxious. So meeting new people in a foreign place can be tiring, while watching TV at home with a close family member is usually easy.

It's worth adding that all humans have a need to socialize, to some extent. The amount of social contact required for mental health varies from person to person. Happily, we live in a world where social contact is easy enough to find (online, for example), so it's rarely a problem, at least among the computer literate.

The idea that we expend energy in social situations isn't clinically meaningful, but it is useful as a tool to help us think about ourselves. There is a lot of value in thinking about ourselves and our own behaviour; this is one of the ways we grow and improve. I think that the "energy model" of socializing helps us understand our unconscious motivations (although I think that "introvert" as a label can be harmful).

We consider ourselves to be furries, which means that (for most of us) we perceive ourselves as animal-people. We create versions of ourselves from scratch, each of us with at least one (virtual) physical body and (virtual) personality. And research from the IARP (link) suggests that our furry selves are significantly different – indeed, happier and more mature – than our non-furry selves. I think that furry can be seen as an exploration of who we really are. I think that we are, collectively, doing ourselves a lot of personal and mental good.

A therapist will often use a simple personality test as a tool. This might be a Myers-Briggs test, or a question like "if you were an animal, what animal would you be?" The therapist's intent is to get the client thinking about themselves: a follow-up question might be "what is it that attracts you

to wolves?"[3]

In a therapeutic environment, there isn't any real value in personality profiling. The therapist doesn't care that you're ENTJ, or that you feel you would be a macro silver wolf centaur with thunderbolts in your fur and teardrops that taste like Irn-Bru. It's just a conversation starter. Yet it's a very useful tool in the therapist's kit: therapy is a lot more than "just conversation".

Furry gives us a framework to continually converse with ourselves. We can challenge ourselves with new ideas, we can road-test behaviour, we can think and rethink who (or what) we really are. Furry can be a kind of self-administered therapy. We can think about it ourselves (if we are feeling introverted) or we can chat with others (if we are feeling extroverted). We're a group of very lucky animal-people.

#

Are You an Introvert? A One-Question Quiz

Question 1:

Think back to a time where you emotionally reacted to a negative event. This may have been a break-up, or the death of someone close to you, or a sudden health scare. Pretend you are watching a video of yourself during this difficult time.

Watch the video and observe how you cope. Do you spend time on your own, trying to manage your thoughts? Or do you look for support from other people, in person or online?

Undoubtedly you did both. Both are always required, for all people.

If you (mostly) unplugged your internet and refused to answer your phone, you are more introverted. If you (mostly) sought help from others, you are more extroverted.

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[3]Furry joke answer: "foxes, duh"

Chapter 12

October

Figure 12.1: Day 1 of Tyler's journey

12.1 Carroll Ballard's Never Cry Wolf

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This is my final article looking at the great animal films of Carroll Ballard. The other articles are on *The Black Stallion* (1979), *Fly Away Home* (1996) before, and *Duma* (2005).

It opened the way to an oldand very navechildhood fantasy of mine: to go off into the wilderness, and test myself against all the dangerous things lurking there. And to find that basic animal that I secretly hoped was hidden somewhere inside myself. I imagined, at that point, Id become a new man, with a strength and courage Id never known before.

Tyler is a nerdy biologist who has accepted an unusual task: spend 6 months, alone, in the Canadian arctic to observe the behaviour of local wolves. *Never Cry Wolf* follows Tyler from springs thaw to the first snowfalls of the coming winter. Its a curious film: subtle, slow, and moving. It is also a masterpiece.

The story is of Tylers relationship with wolves. Over the course of six months, he starts as a detached scientific observer, and learns to embrace his inner wolf as time goes on. (The quote at the beginning of this article is from Tylers voiceover narration in the first few seconds of *Never Cry Wolf*.) This film is about the furry condition.

Never Cry Wolf was filmed and released in the early 1980s, years before furry coalesced into a discrete group. In the early days of furry, it was largely a cartoon animal fandom, based around pre-existing works of art such as Disneys Robin Hood. Nowadays, furry still has plenty of fandom elements but is more about personal identity: we choose to think of ourselves as animal-people, and we spend time in a virtual world filled with our fellow animal-people.

Tyler is an animal person: he is, essentially, a wolf furry. Over the course of the film, he learns to think of himself as an instinctual animal, rather than a purely logical being. He even has an (imaginary) wolf physical form.

Tyler is expressing a personal connection with the animal world. He is exploring something that has been a part of human spirituality for at least dozens of millennia. We furries are merely the newest manifestation of this spiritual thread.

Tylers furriness starts to blossom when he is introduced to some concepts of Inuit totemism. Tyler doesnt co-opt Inuit beliefs or tradition, rather he uses some ideas as a template to create his own, personal relationship with his inner wolf. He remains a scientist and a skeptic, but slowly sheds the protective baggage he carries with himself. (Metaphor alert: some of his baggage is actual, uh, baggage, and he even hides in his baggage from some wolves early on.)

Tyler begins his personal journey after being dumped, alone, in the wilderness along with supplies for his study. The Canadian arctic in early spring is harsh and deadly. In all of Carroll Ballards films, there is a sense of malevolence about the natural environment: the deserted island of *The Black Stallion*, the flight in flimsy ultralights in *Fly Away Home*, the South African wilderness in *Duma*. And so it is in *Never Cry Wolf*; faced with the likelihood of exposure in freezing temperatures, Tyler makes a series of bad decisions: he defrosts a beer, types out an angry letter (in triplicate) to his superiors, and rides out his first night huddled in an upturned canoe. Its hard to tell if he is ignorant of deaths approach, or resigned to his fate.

Tyler is eventually bundled into shelter and temporary safety by a passing Inuit. Here he dreams of being devoured by wolves, a moment that signifies the birth of his inner animal. The dream is terrifying on first viewing, but over the length of the film it takes on a mythical quality as Tyler, wolf-person, grows.

Soon after Tyler awakens, we see the first evidence that he has changed. He falls through thin ice, and saves himself through a combination of intelligence and instinct. He dries himself, and his clothes, by a fire, and we can sense that his internal journey has begun. This scene is a key turning point in the film as well.

For starters, this is the first time we see Tyler naked. Its initially played for tittilative laughs (as in: tee hee I can see his bum), but the scene stretches until his nudity is a comfortable, natural, default state. Tyler is shedding more of his uptight human baggage, and he starts to relax, to feel at home in the wilderness.

From this moment on the film becomes hazy, soft, and beautiful; Ballards direction encourages the viewer to share Tylers surrender to the natural world. This stands in obvious juxtaposition to the tone of the preceding part of the film which is rushed, full of unconvincing danger, and a bit hammy. Its clear that Ballard wanted to spend as little time on the preamble as possible.

Soon, Tyler comes across a wolf pack and he starts his study. He tries to hide his presence from the wolves, and fails miserably against the wolfs senses. He quickly abandons any attempt of subterfuge, and eventually negotiates a wolf-approved territory within observing distance.

His time observing the wolves is the heart of the film. There is little action and Tyler is alone for much of the time, save for a developing friendship with two Inuit. There are two parallel stories: Tylers growing relationship with the wolves, and Tylers growing relationship with his personal, inner wolf.

This long section of the film is, to put it mildly, remarkable. Respect grows between Tyler and the wolves, to the point that they are eventually able to vocally express their fellowship, the howling of the wolves mirrored in Tylers bassoon. And Tylers inner wolf becomes more real, gaining a physical form and a personality: strong, quiet, intelligent, and protective.

The films high point takes place on a hazy late-summer afternoon. Tyler has reached a peace with himself and with his environment by this point, and is dozing in the sun when a herd of caribou thunder past. He becomes wondrously lost in the stampede, as the wolves gather to corral the more vulnerable members of the caribou. Its wordless, visceral, and complex.

The flow of *Never Cry Wolf* is that of the seasons. Tyler is vulnerable and nave in the spring; learns and grows through the summer, before the contentment of autumn. His internal journey is reflected in the changing landscape and in the growth of the wolves family (no Ballard film would be complete without the odd cute baby animal scene). He starts as an observer and ends as a participant; his trimmed moustache grows into full beard; he begins with bureaucracy and ends in ecstatic nudity.

From a furry perspective, *Never Cry Wolf* is something very special. If you feel or imagine a connection with your furry species, especially if youre a wolf, you should take the time to track down this film. (That advice does not include anyone who identifies as a mouse. It does not go well for mice in *Never Cry Wolf*.)

But even for non-furs, *Never Cry Wolf* is a great film. Its the antidote to patronizing bullshit like *Dances With Wolves* or doco-lite snoozefests like *March Of The Penguins*. Its thoughtful without being moralizing, complex without being complicated, and moving without being melodramatic. As the late Roger Ebert put it, *Never Cry Wolf* is a classic.

Final notes:

- There is a lot of male nudity and alcohol consumption in *Never Cry Wolf*. Its unthinkable that such a film would get a PG rating in America today.

- Charles Martin Smith, who plays Tyler, went on to direct Air Bud, which is a live-action film about a dog that plays basketball. From the sublime to the ridiculous.

Never Cry Wolf is available on iTunes.

This is the final of four articles on the films of Carroll Ballard. All four films are great. Choose your species:

- *The Black Stallion* (horse)

- *Never Cry Wolf* (wolf)

- *Fly Away Home* (goose)

- *Duma* (cheetah)

12.2 On Advertising - Part 1: Before

I'm trying a little bit of an experiment with a few projects of mine.

Advertising.

I am unashamed to admit that I run AdBlock almost all of the time that I'm online. I think that advertising is a shoddy and cheap, albeit necessary way for many online services to derive income, in general. I also think that, in general, ads are effective on a level that is perhaps not in line with the goals of an organization determined to be as introspective as possible, in a lot of ways. That is, they don't necessarily fit with the goal of the projects I have in mind. Flashy art and animations are great for artists because they show off art and animation skills. They're wonderful for organizations such as Rabbit Valley and Sofawolf, that offer products for sale because they showcase the products. Even so, I'm left with a few questions about the way advertising works within the furry fandom, and how information is transmitted within a potential audience.

How does one advertise a blog that offers nothing for sale and provides a non-essential service?

How does one advertise for a survey, and in what ways does that impact the results gained from that survey?

Does animation play a role? If so, how much?

What difference does wording make, particularly when it comes to key words such as 'sex'? For that matter, how does an advertisement that mentions sex differ from an advertisement that does not?

These are hardly deep questions. Ask any advertising agency or the like and you're likely to come up with some quips about what does and does not work, as well as what works best for what type of product.

If you look at us, however, as well as our sister project, LSF, we are, at best, irregularly-publishing magazines filled, almost entirely, with opinion articles. The articles often have basis in statistics pulled from here or there, but for the most part, the pieces are written more as introspective or observational explorations of the act of participating in a subculture. For us, these questions bear additional meaning, as this advertising experiment is taking place almost entirely within the subculture itself.

Here's what we've done:

1. I've set up four advertisements on two different sites, FurAffinity and SoFurry. These ads are for four different projects: [adjective][species], Love – Sex – Fur, The Furry Survey, and an unrelated project, Bookmarfs!.

2. All four advertisements have slight differences:

- All ads except for Bookmarfs! are animated.

- The ad for LSF contains the word 'sex'.

- The ad for [a][s] and for the Furry Survey contain text other than the subtitle of the site.

3. The ads should rotate fairly evenly among other ads on both sites (though Dragoneer and Tourmal are invited to comment on the advertising systems in place on their respective sites).

4. All four ads have campaign data indicating their source. These only show up once per click, of course, so we'll only see these as unique visitors. That is, there's no way to bolster the numbers by simply clicking on the ads a bunch of times!

Just to start things out, I've taken snapshots from before the ads went up of how traffic looks.

[adjective][species]

You can see, here, just how the traffic generally looks for this site in particular. You can see, for example, when articles go live, and even when an article that winds up becoming particularly popular or contentious goes live as compared to one that doesn't: JM published an article on introversion on Monday the 23rd that became the subject of heated discussion, and I published an article two days later that was largely neutral (this is the way of things, we've decided: I write introspective pieces, JM writes more provocative pieces). This is a pretty standard few weeks for us, and we've had few deviations from that. One can see the effects from conventions at which we have panels or advertising, as we did for Anthrocon one year.

Love – Sex – Fur

LSF has been quiet of late, due to my personal schedule, and so you can see a similar graph, lower in traffic, to the time between articles on this site. Visitors come in from various places, usually search engines and old Twitter links (the t.co link-shortener shows up as the referrer in these cases).

The Furry Poll

The Furry Poll, not having any changes over time within the year, shows bumps primarily from links in from outside, such as on this site, or other forums where others post the link. Reddit, FurAffinity forums, FurBase.de, and so on are all sources of the second bump, for example.

Figure 12.2: The [a][s] banner (note that the real banner is animated)
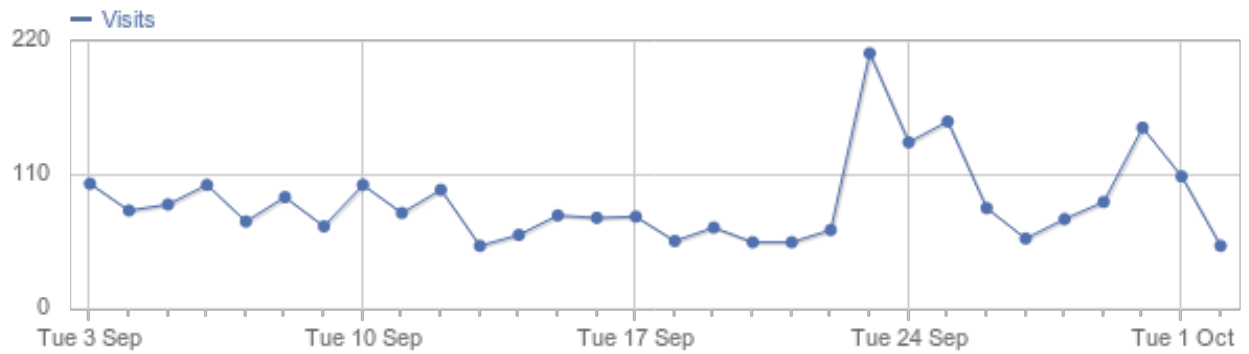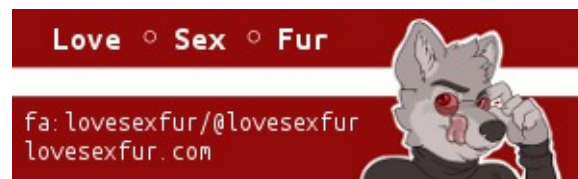

Figure 12.3: [a][s] stats prior to ads

Figure 12.4: Love – Sex – Fur banner (note that the real banner is animated)
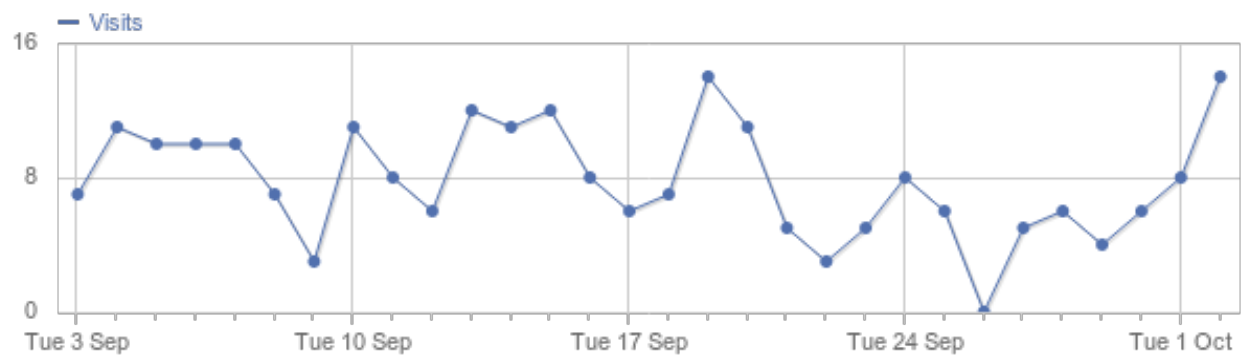

Figure 12.5: Love – Sex – Fur stats prior to ads

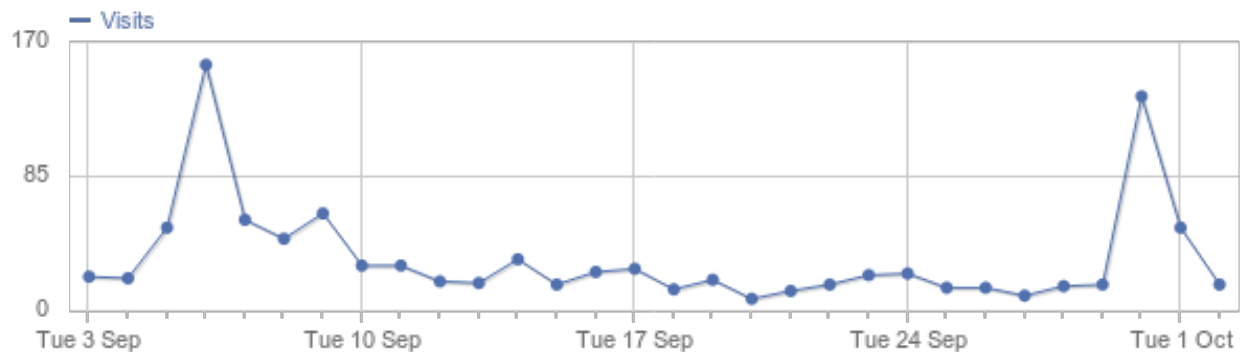Figure 12.6: The furrypoll banner (note that the real banner is animated)

Figure 12.7: The Furry Poll stats prior to ads

Bookmarfs!

Bookmarfs!, on the other hand, gains traffic at regular intervals from posts at the beginning of the month (when that month's book is announced), and at the end of the month (when that month's discussion occurs). Full disclosure: although Bookmarfs! is not related to [a][s] at all, I do help out with them in a technical capacity.

You can also see the advertisements that we placed, above. These are the different paths that we'll be investigating as inroads that advertising provides. What it is that we hope to see is how information spreads within the fandom in terms of something sort of neutral and random such as these advertisements, organic social sharing, such as retweets or links provided to friends, and from followers who catch us on FA journals, Tweets, or G+ posts.

Working within a subculture such as ours, I will posit that, while advertising drives some traffic to sites such as these, the majority of our readership found the site through sharing, due to the nature of our content. However, given that these ads will all be live for about a month, I'll pull statistics again in a few weeks and see just how things have changed – or not!

We're interested to hear how you found this site (and if you found the others, how), as well as how you think that this little experiment will play out. Will members of the furry community pay attention to the ads? Will they largely ignore them? How do you feel about advertising in general, and on furry sites? Do you treat them differently? Let us know in the comments!
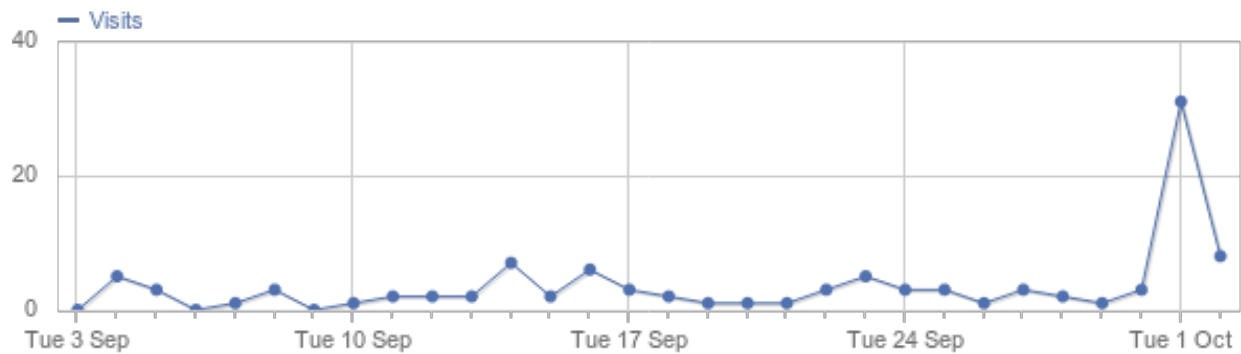
Figure 12.8: The Bookmarfs! banner

Figure 12.9: Bookmarfs! stats prior to ads

(Note: [a][s] and related projects are, of course, run totally out of pocket, and we have no ad revenue of our own; we stand to gain nothing but information from this little experiment, all of which we aim to share with you!)

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

Forneus Forneus is a man pretending to be a fish who is actually a cat.

Nuka Courtney Nuka Plante is a PhD social psychology student at the University of Waterloo, furry, and co-founder of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project.

Newfur Newfur is a fluffy red fox and college student who, true to his name, is relatively new to the furry fandom. He reads voraciously, writes unsteadily, loves music, mathematics, and molecular biology, and is an avid participant in Bookmarfs!

Amethyst Bassilisk ...

Huskyteer Huskyteer is a writer, motorcyclist, aviation geek and full-time husky. Her fiction can be found on SoFurry as well as in the pages of Heat, ROAR, Allasso and Hot Dish.

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