

On Furry

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Madison Scott-Clary

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On Furry

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Usually, I'm the type to skip past introductions.

It seems like much of the time, they're used to give the author a little room to talk themselves up and rarely add much to the content to the book. When they do have some pertinent information to add, it tends to be just reiterated later on in the book. Of course, here I am now, writing a book, and I don't think I can really get by without an intro.

Once I decided to write this, I realized that I had a legitimate reason. In particular, I decided to take my cue from Hanne Blank's excellent work *Straight: A Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*, where the author uses the introduction to explain her basis for writing as she does. Namely, why the topic is important to her and why she's in a unique position to write about it.

Similarly, I'd like to use this chance to explain a little bit about why the furry fandom is so important for me and why I'm in a unique position to write about it. A lot of this will help to explain why I write the way I do, in particular. When one is confronted with a piece of investigative non-fiction, one is usually reading from the point of view of one who is viewing the topic from the outside. Jon Krakauer's excellent *Under the Banner of Heaven*¹, for instance, is written from the outsider's perspective – it's particularly effective, too: the idea that you are following the author as they learn about the topic themselves is very enticing as it neatly sidesteps the possibility of sounding too academic.

So. I'm a furry.

¹*Krakauer, interestingly enough, chooses to use the afterword in place of the introduction for providing his declaration of interest

I found myself getting into the fandom during the summer of 2000. A lot of things were happening to me around then. I was just leaving middle school and heading into high school, I was figuring my sexuality out at the same time that my family was going through troubles of its own, and I was basically just starting to become cognizant of the world around me as full of individuals, each with a story of their own.

The subculture embodied by furry was particularly attractive to me, then. I was certainly drawn in by the openness of those involved, and aided quite a bit by the fact that so much of it was based almost entirely on the Internet. That my dad had given me a computer and let me start managing the house's file server at the time meant that I was already spending a good deal of time online anyway, and so an interesting instance of feedback started up: I found furry because I was online, and I was encouraged to be online more due to my participation within the fandom, which in turn led me deeper and deeper into the fandom.

I certainly don't need to spill my entire life's story here, of course. Needless to say, I stuck with my friends in the fandom and eventually settled into a comfortable level of participation. It wasn't until recently, around the end of 2010, that I started to participate more online. I began by creating a visualization of some of the results of Klisoura's² Furry Survey in order to draw a few conclusions about them.

After a brief interruption during which I graduated from college and found a job, I delved right back in, creating the

²★I will, by default, refer to people by their fan pseudonyms, rather than their real names; consider it "language immersion"

website [adjective][species]. The origin of this site was a joke between myself and a friend about how many use that as the scheme for creating their own pseudonym, but the site quickly grew into an introspective investigation into what all was involved in being a fur.

Here is why I need to write an introduction: much of the writing here is based in part on my writings on [adjective][species], which is subtitled “The furry world from the inside out.” That is, my goal was to provide a forum for exploring the fandom to the fandom. It wasn’t until the site continued to grow and I watched a video by the Anthrocon chairman, Samuel Conway (known within the fandom as Uncle Kage), on how best to act as ambassador with the world at large, and the particular subset of the media, when I decided that a work like this would prove informative to a wider audience.

I won’t continue on without remarking on the favored maxim of one of [adjective][species]’s other authors, JM: “the most visible members of a minority are rarely its best ambassadors”. Perhaps I will not be the best ambassador to the fandom. However, I do feel like I fall close to the mean when it comes to the participants of our subculture. Additionally, part of [a][s] is a general census and survey, which gives me access to a much wider array of data than simply my own introspective musings.

My goal, therefore, is to provide a view of the fandom from the inside, similar to my goal with [adjective][species]. However, I must now write to a wider audience without losing my position from within furry. The reason for my introduction and so many words here is to explain that, although I am not a

trained sociologist or psychologist, I do feel that much of this will be interesting to others, particularly if I write in a personable fashion. You'll see me using "my" and "our" in order to refer to the furry fandom here and this is why: the fandom is made up of individuals like myself, and one of the best ways I know to not only respect those individuals but also give back to them is to give them a personality.



Furry is a big and complicated thing, being as decentralized as it is. In short, it is a collection of people who are interested in anthropomorphics; that is, things that are not human, but are given human characteristics. "Talking animals" would be a glib way to put it. Very glib, actually, and many would take strong offense to that term. The fact that the fandom is so hard to define informs the structure of this work:

Part 1 — Participation Mystique What the fandom is and why it's so difficult to define. That the definition of furry is worth a third of the book is why I won't go into it very deeply here.

Part 2 — Character Versus Self Focusing on a very important part of the fandom: the furry avatars that we create for ourselves, the why and how behind them, and the implications of interacting with others almost exclusively through a consciously constructed persona.

Part 3 — Interconnectivity The daily life of a furry and how that plays out, given the fact that furry is, for most, a social hobby beyond anything else.

Additionally, at the end of this work, I'll provide a few appendices in order to better explain some concepts and words that aren't readily apparent to the reader. As with any subculture or fandom, much of our interaction is based around our own vernacular and our own history. For those looking deeper into the topic, I will do my best to provide a brief glossary and timeline of furry there.



Why write a book about the furry fandom? It seems like one of those topics that simply isn't well-defined enough to pull off enough content in order to come up with a book, from the surface. We're a group of people who congregate on the Internet and occasionally in person without any central authority, guiding purpose, or even anything to hold us together beyond an interest in anthropomorphics.

From the surface, yes, I suppose furry is a bunch of entertaining folk content mostly in their own artistic output, rarely touching on the outside world except when, say, a crime show features a faux furry convention or a magazine attempts an exposé. Delving deep, however, one finds a well of interesting features and structures evident within the fandom.

Furry, it turns out, is fairly unique in a good number of ways. It exists both online and off, but in decidedly different ways. The lack of central structure or even a strong core idea has led to a loose-knit and diverse group of individuals who, despite all that, are still all willing to accept the same label and participate in the same communities. Sure, anthropomorphism helps to tie us together, and most furries agree that that is the subject at the core

of the subculture, but hardly can any two agree on just *how* that is the core of the fandom — every two individuals experience it in a different way, or multiple different ways if one takes time into account.

In fact, this disagreement on the “central tenet” seems to have become the fandom’s *raison d’être* in a way. The fact that we can use this variety as a form of cohesion leads to more than enough subject matter to power a mere book. I will certainly spend a good amount of time on the meme of “drama” that flows through the fandom to its very amorphous core, here. Perhaps it’s even this disagreement that helps define what furry is. If not disagreement itself, ready acceptance of the fact that disagreement exists, and will always exist, does seem to help keep the fandom coherent: the egalitarian acceptance of redefinition of the group helps define the group, in the end.

Finally, the fandom is growing. It’s growing at an astounding speed, actually. In a recent conversation with the owner of the site FurAffinity.net, it was mentioned that 145,787 new user accounts had been created on the site in the year 2011 alone — averaging between 350–500 new accounts per day — and that for that year, upwards of 2.1 million submissions had been added to the website. Furry is spreading and finding its own unique ways into popular culture, whether it be Spirit Hoods³ or the several Woot.com shirts that have furry themse and, in at least one instance, a furry creator. And finally, sites such as [adjective][species], Twitter accounts such as BestOfFurry, and the massive proliferation of social sites such as The Furry Agenda

³★furred hoods with animal ears and, occasionally, paws that have been adopted by the hipster subculture especially

indicate the need for increased social connection among an increasingly large population of participants.

Furry deserves study. It deserves it because so many unique things are going on within the fandom, but it deserves it also because it is interesting in its own right. The fandom means enough to me that here I am writing a book (with an introduction, no less!), but it also means enough for most of us to accept it as part of our life, living out our furry lives, taking it on as a job, creating and doing, being our animal-person selves.

First of all, I'd like to apologize for the dearth of articles, recently. It really weighs on me, and I feel that I've been neglecting one of my favorite things ever: writing too-long articles about animal people. Not all of my time was just sitting, twiddling my thumbs, though. I did wind up with a cool new job, and that panel for RMFC took up quite a bit of my time, actually. Most of what has been going on, though, at least in my spare time over the last few weeks, has been dealing with a few health problems that had me a little down.

My general solution to the anxiety and emotional weirdness involved with those sorts of things, when they get bad, is to seek out as many positive (pawsitive, if you will) things. The usual method is to ask on Twitter "what's awesome right now?" I love getting the responses, hearing what people think is neat and cool, hearing all the wonderful things that are happening to people. "Exciting new development at work for me!" "Free bagels." "My coffee." As I poke my way through the replies, though, favoriting most of them, I notice that just about every icon has a muzzle and ears. So you know what's totally awesome to me? Furries.

A lot of what this site focuses on is not really all that negative. Zik is exploring the world of furry, JM is peeking into specific aspects of our subculture, and Klisoura is being wonderful by pulling specific data for us. (Kyell is automatically awesome, because fox; and guest authors get a free in, here.) However, the topics tend to be obviously interesting, and I've noticed that we do tend to approach issues from both sides, even if we wind up more firmly on one side than the other. JM's articles on Zoophilia and cub porn both take this tack: they start with an exposition of both sides, even though they tend to come down on the positive side. It's definitely a successful method, and it seems that a lot of our readership does appreciate the more exploratory style articles.

I'm going to take a step back, though, and just spend a few words on some blatant positivity. I really like furies. I really like being a furry. I think we are, all around, a great group of people focused on a few great core ideas, but with plenty of diversity thrown in to make sure that we lead interesting lives. We are awesome.

There's a rhetorical technique known as hendiatriis, which is one of those things which you will spot everywhere once you know about it. It means making one point through three statements. I know that it figures prominently in my own writing, but I see it everywhere. Especially in this most political of (US) seasons, the hendiatriis makes a comeback. I'm going to use that here, and the reason I'm even bothering to preface that is that I want to note that I try to fit all of my articles into three categories: participation mystique (how we base a portion of our identity off our membership with the fandom), character ver-

sus self (the concept of creating and interacting via an avatar), and interaction (what we gain by being a subculture, rather than being solipsistic).

Participation Mystique

Participation mystique is basing a portion of your identity off of membership to a group or participation in some sort of idea. I've written about it before, but it's worth bringing up again specifically for the benefits that it offers within the furry community. The idea that we can structure a portion of what we consider ourselves around our membership to this sometimes quite odd subculture is quite impressive. I know that, for myself. I feel that I would be a less complete individual without the fandom.

That's part of the issue with anything that uses the words identity, though. By their very nature, they are things that, without which, we would find it nearly impossible to picture ourselves. If I try to picture myself without furry, for instance, I come up with a blank for several parts of my day - checking Twitter, relaxing online with friends during some downtime, planning for a convention panel, or even right now, sitting and writing a meta-furry article for a blog with a giant wolf on the banner. Without furry, would I substitute that portion of my identity with something else? Would I have taken part in some other participation mystique that would have filled out the same spaces in the topology of my soul? I'm sure it's possible. There are a lot of things that I'm interested in besides furry, to be truthful. Would I be the same person, though? Of course not.

There are, as someone mentioned to me on Twitter, inherent ties between the fandom and identity. It's not just that I am experiencing this sort of participation mystique, many of us are. There is a certain sort of subconscious, unvoiced togetherness that we gain from sharing this mystical participation, this joining of ourselves with a group. It sounds a little cultish, when I write it out like that, but I do think it's true. I've noticed that, if you run into a furry that you have never met before, there's always at least one thing you can talk about: the ways in which you base a portion of your Self on your being a part of this larger group of animal people.

Character Versus Self

Character versus self is another theme that I've written on before. There are several ways in which we interact with the world around us, and one of the most important for us within the fandom is through our own characters, those avatars which stand for the core of our being tied with our interest in anthropomorphics, as well as our identity in the fandom. It came up during the RMFC panel that many furies can even have several different characters, as opposed to just one avatar that they keep. That we can hold that in our minds, that we can wear a mask to fit our moods and our desires, to be the type of individual we want to be, that is quite amazing, I think.

To paraphrase a friend, we put so much work and creativity into creating something that represents our most intimate of aspects, and then we wear it openly, making that the type of person with whom others should interact. You all know that I write and care about gender and all of the complexities involved with it (I can think of at least two articles that have surrounded

it that I've written, after all), and I think that this idea of taking a personal aspect, much more personal than might be normally shared outside of the fandom, and making it a core part of the character that we create is definitely useful. Gender can often be one of those things, where one can play a character of whatever biological sex, or even gender identity, that they want here in the fandom, and have it be just fine.

Another example, and a good way to tie into the next section, is the ways in which we benefit from having an avatar through which we interact. There are, of course, varying degrees of introvert and extrovert, and beyond that, varying degrees of social anxiety. These are things that just about everyone experiences, even if it's on the extreme far end. I can say for myself that, although I like to think of myself as reasonably extroverted, I have quite a bit of social anxiety, and it takes a lot of effort for me to have successful interactions in the world. If I'm pretending to be a fox or whatever, though, I can hide behind the fact that I'm doing just that, and the interactions go a lot smoother. Perhaps it's just the fact that I'm interacting with other furies, but I do feel that having that layer of Who I Really Feel I Am between me and my interlocutor does provide an additional level of comfort.

Interaction

The idea of a chosen family is not a new one. I know that, at the very least, it ties into the idea of being kicked out of one's home, and adopting a chosen family of sorts to help be the surrogates for those whom are no longer in ones lives. Even beyond that, however, I think that the idea holds true within furry. There is no one in my family with whom I am closer than some

of my friends in the fandom. The fact that my chosen family here, outside of my normal family whom I still love, can continue to grow and change just tickles me pink, too. I can honestly say that, within the last two weeks, at least one additional member has been added to this family, someone with whom I am more comfortable talking to than most members of my blood-related family. This always amazes me: the mutability of who we consider family is odd enough, but within the fandom, just how quickly those relationships can grow.

I'm not alone in this at all, either. I asked on Twitter, before I started this article, what the most positive thing was that my followers could think of the fandom, and the majority of the answers revolved around the interconnectedness and relationships that spring from it. "Made so many good friends," "Given me [...] a husband," "that I am not being judged or ridiculed for who I am." These are all, to me, true signs of affection for the other members in our subculture. That we have not found, but created an area where all of these things can be the case is quite singular, to me. Of all the other subcultures to which I'd consider myself a member - programmers, musicians, awkward people - I don't think that it's likely that I would be able to build a friendship quite as quickly. Sure, in programming, we can debate the (de)merits of PHP, or in music we can talk about preferences for music to perform versus music to listen to. Neither of those things (thankfully) take up much of my identity, however.

See, here in our subculture, we combine all three of these levels of participation. There's the utmost personal level of creating a part of our identity around it, there's the level wherein

we create a front-stage mask that may, in some cases, more closely relate our back-stage personas, and there's the level where we actively participate in the little micro-world around us. So many of us have bought into the fandom (many in more ways than one) that it's become something greater than the sum of its parts. I challenge you all to do the same and imagine where you'd be without the fandom, try and figure out what theme, idea, culture, or group, or combination thereof, could take its place, and define the borders of furry in your own lives. We really are pretty awesome.

I really am sorry for ducking out for so long, and I hope to be back soon for more posts-with-too-many-words. You all are quite amazing in your own right, but by all means, feel free to say in the comments just how the furry fandom has been awesome to you, personally! We'd love to hear some pawsitive* stories.

* HOLY MACKEREL check out THESE PAWS.

Part I

Participation Mystique

Chapter 1

Participation Mystique

January 25, 2012

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

When I was reading William Gibson's book *Pattern Recognition*, I was introduced to the term *participation mystique*, which comes from early Jungian psychology, adapted from Lévy-Bruhl

in order to describe the means by which we, as people, can define a portion of ourselves through membership in a community or association with an object. This, I think, is the core of the furry subculture.

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

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

These sources are important to us because they give us an extant product to latch onto, a body of work to study, expand upon, and dream up new microcosms in the macrocosm of their world. For the rare few who are gifted enough to create the world in itself, it can be a little (or very) distressing, but the hu-

man mind is always adept at treating a fictional world as a fractal, looking closer and finding - or at least adding - more detail. It's doubly important, then that furry itself 'grew up' around these sources, at least in part. It allowed us to start with several very specific ideas, look deeper into them, and come out with something general enough that a group of individuals from different interests could come together and say "this is us".

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

I freely admit that this isn't a very intense association with furry. For a little bit near when I was first getting into the fandom, I did think about myself as a fox (as I was at the time), and would often spend nights awake in bed imagining myself comfortable with my partner, both of us our cute little fox-sona selves. I know that for some, this sort of self-zoomorphism can become almost a whole-body species-dysphoria, extending from feeling as though one exhibits characteristics of their ani-

mal character to feeling decidedly uncomfortable being a human. I feel as though I should be careful writing about this, partly because I know relatively little about it beyond my own simple experiences, but mostly due to the fact that it tends to shift at this point into our...lets say “sister subcultures” of the-rianthropy and the were culture, which are not necessarily the focus of [adjective][species]. That said, this focus on the species as it pertains to the self is still important within furry culture, particularly when it comes to character creation (“I don’t feel like much of seagull, so why would I make my character one?”).

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

With something as loose-weaved as furry, it’s difficult to imagine there being anything more than the faintest borders around the subculture. There are, though, and where there are

borders, there's bound to be someone aiming to push them. Beyond simply the species available here on earth, many are more content to explore the bounds created in science-fiction and fantasy universes. At least one of the followers of our twitter account is a Wookiee, and for a while, there were several Kzinti and Skiltaires floating around.

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

All of these describe different aspects of our participation mystique as furries. The way we associate portions of our own selves with this abstract noun that is "furry". We identify with the fandom in all our myriad ways, and by virtue of our identities, form the fandom in itself. The question has come up several times in the last few days about what exactly makes a furry. That's one of those questions that's decidedly difficult to answer in a way that's satisfactory to all. I think that the best definition that I could come up with is that a furry is someone who claims to be a furry. There are probably some who fall outside this definition that others would consider as members of the fandom, but it's part of our mystical participation that it be consensual

- one cannot be forced to identify with something. I guess in that sense, 'furry' winds up being more of an adjective than a noun, though the word as an adjective already carries too strong a meaning to be overloaded like that.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Doxa

March 14, 2012

I'm sure I've gone on before about the benefits of working within a community, but I'll say it again: you guys are ace.

While running the [a][s] Twitter account, I do my best to follow back everyone who follows the account. This isn't simply a nice-guy type thing to do; some of the best inspiration comes from all you fuzzies out there. After all, the articles here would get pretty boring if they were solely about what it was like to be a furry without being a member of the furry subculture. This week's article comes from a recommendation and brief conversation with Drenthe, a raccoon of quality, about a book he had seen a review of which I subsequently purchased. The book was Hanne Blank's *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*. I think it's fairly obvious by now how much gender and sexuality interest me.

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

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

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

All of this, of course, got me wondering about what sort of doxa and marked categories we have within the fandom. Culture as whole has the givens and the goes-without-sayings, and individual subcultures, as parts of that whole, are just as susceptible to their own specific doxa. I've written before about some of the stages of growth of an individual within western gay popular culture, and those, in their own way, are a sort of doxa, if it goes without saying that younger members of that culture go through their phases of discovery.

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

Everyone has a personal character- When I first started getting into the fandom and learning more about furry, it seemed as though the first thing you did was choose a species and attributes that fit your personality and did your level best to let that character become you. Everyone I knew had a character that fit them well and only a few I knew had alts, which were mainly used to either sneak around or separate adult aspects of their interactions from more general aspects. However, over

time, I noticed that many of my friends (and me, for that matter) started to create different characters or at least different morphs to correspond to different aspects of their personality. It wasn't so much that one was just a foxman anymore; one was a foxman when chatting with friends, a foxgirl when questioning one's gender identity, a wolverineman to roleplay stronger emotions, and so on.

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

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

that is being challenged by the very fact that we're so willing to point it out and name it.

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

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

It's important to note, here that there is a blurry line between doxa and opinion. One can hold an opinion as a belief and even believe in it quite strongly, but doxa are things that we implicitly believe are true about the society in which we're embedded, things that we take as fact. The reason that the line is blurry is that, not only is it sometimes difficult to disentangle

opinion from perceived fact, but that as doxa shifts and changes over time, it can veer closer or farther way from opinion.

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

So is doxa good or bad? That's a tough question to answer. Doxa may be one of those things that "just is". It's an artifact of the way we work as individuals as well as the way our societies are built. Certainly, some doxa cause harm to individuals and minorities, and even within those minorities, sub-doxa of a sort can cause additional problems in the form of backlash, but commonly held beliefs and ideas are part of the glue that holds us together in cultures. Even within our own fandom, there are several currents and ideas that form the shifting background of whatever furry is. Equally difficult to ask, then, is what is the next doxa? What new ideas will we find out we are taking for granted when they're challenged? What commonly held be-

liefs will lead to contention in the future of our small group of animal-people? While it is difficult to look within ourselves and figure these things out now beyond searching for marked categories, it certainly bears exploration once they come to light.

Chapter 3

On Names

December 25, 2011

What is in a name, anyway? For us here in the fandom, a name can be several things: a pseudonym, a description, even a whole other being, however fictional. It's safe to say, then, that names are pretty important to furies, and so maybe that's worth taking a look at. You have to start somewhere, so let's begin with how to construct a name. There are, of course, many other ways to construct a name, but we've listed just a few of the best here.

[adjective][species] - This, of course, goes without saying. It's the only method of choosing a furname that's endorsed by an entire website. On the Internet! The pros? Well, obviously, the first impression will go much smoother, now that everyone knows your a SlutFox or an AngstWolf*. There is simply no mistaking what you are, is there? It's also food for subversion! Who knew, SlutFox is a virgin, and AngstWolf is really doing pretty

alright in life! As for the cons, well, if you can't change the name, but you wind up changing your species, you could be SOL.

The suedonym - Sometimes, you just can't think of a name. Or...well, you can, but they're all taken. Well, that's no reason to stop you! Why, I was once !Xabbu (from a book by Tad Williams), then Ranna (from a book by Garth Nix), who then became As-tarael (same book). The pros - don't really need to think too hard; it might already be memorable! The cons - it might already be memorable as something else; it might already be memorable by many others (I wasn't the only Ranna...). Subcategory: The they-can't-suedonym- You know, it works even better if you don't have to worry about the problems associated with a stolen name. Like if the author or origin is long dead. I knew a cat named Merlin, for instance.

The appropriation- Why not just appropriate another word for yourself? I very rarely go by Happenstance, which is also the name of a French film (pure happenstance, of course). I have a good friend named Whiskey, too. That's good, I like whiskey and Whiskey! Pros: pretty memorable. Cons: this one's pretty safe, actually. Subcategory: l'appropriation- Bonus points if you appropriate from another language. Just.. be careful of Japanese, okay? There are a few Ookamis out there.

The punny animal- Of course, these are totally memorable for reasons that make people want to hit you in the mouth. My otter-sona is named Macchi. As in Macchi-otter. In fact, the back story is that he's got light fur and his parents weren't very inventive, so they named him Caramel. Caramel "Macchi" Otter. Sigh. Pros: totally memorable. Cons: people want to hit you in the mouth. Subcategory: The recondite lingual obfuscation of

humorous intent- If the pun of your name takes more than a few words to explain it...may actually be a pretty good name, because then people won't hit you in the mouth so much.

The real name- I...er...hmm. I guess I may have met someone who used their real name once. Maybe? I mean...hmm. Hey, was that guy Ty really named Ty? Does Karlhockey count? This could be big, guys, I don't know...maybe the new, unique trend in furry pseudonyms would be to just use your real name. I mean, that's pretty inventive, and it's already© you... Pros: inventive. Cons: now they know your name.

- See:<http://rikoshi.gd-kun.net/furry.html>

Chapter 4

On Words

February 8, 2012

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

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

So. What is furry?

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

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

I like this metaphor when it comes to overloading words in language. In particular, I feel that the concept of an overloaded term intended to mean multiple discrete things is particularly applicable, given the response I've gotten to certain posts and tweets. Namely, Altivo's comments to the article on sexism in the fandom and Sparf's responses to my twitter query about one's favorite "unintentionally furry work of fiction". In both cases, the difference between one person's definition of

furry and the other's is notable. The big discrepancy seems to be whether or not the holder of the definition considers things that are not intentionally furry as furry or not. Put another way, is anything that represents an anthropomorphic animal furry?

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

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

My biggest complaint with simply claiming "any anthropomorphized animal" as our own is that the definition is simply too big for a fandom to be able to be structured around it. Specifically, I feel that there is more to the fandom than sim-

ply anthropomorphic animals: avatars. It's not so much that we share thoughts or even fantasies about anthro-animals with each other, but that we all create our own avatars consisting of a mix of ourselves and an animal of our choice. I'm not sure that a furry convention would be able to gain multiple thousands of attendees if it simply consisted of many people agreeing loudly with each other that they like talking foxes.

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

This is why I prefer the definition for furry as "a collection of people who identify as furries". I think that it encompasses the right amount of people without overstepping bounds. It allows me to say things like "unintentionally furry" in order to differentiate between those who do something related to anthropomorphic animals and those who consider themselves members

of a group who is willing to focus on anthropomorphics to the extent that many will even create for themselves an avatar for interpersonal interaction that is an anthropomorphic animal. In short, it allows me to step on the fewest toes. Or tails.

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

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

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

Do be aware of first impressions- Conway suggests that you lead with your answer to the question "what is all this?" by say-

ing that we are fans of “cartoon animals”. While this grates on my nerves, I have a hard time disagreeing. If someone’s first opinion of you is as a fan of Tom and Jerry and Rocky and Bullwinkle, then there is little harm done before you go on to explain the fact that many of us come up with our own personal characters with which we associate.

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

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

Besides even that, though, our interaction with others within the fandom depends in part on what we consider to be a furry. Some have a more liberal definition of furry, in that it includes constructs that are not intended to be included in a fandom of those who create their own constructs for themselves. Others, however, hesitate to even call themselves furry, so much as furry artists, or eschewing even that, anthro or even animal artists. Put that way, my own definition seems to be something of a cop out: I say that those, whether or not they have con-

structed their own characters, are furies so long as they identify as such.

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

Chapter 5

On Pronouns

September 5, 2012

I seem to be drilling down with this (very spread out) series. I started out with a general overview of participation mystique in the fandom, narrowed it to some specific uses of words, and now I'm focusing specifically on pronouns. I can't say that I have any plans for a fourth iteration, but I'm assuming that it will start going into syllables. Arf, bark, and the like. Pretty good syllables, if you ask me.

Pronouns are already short enough as it is, usually only one syllable. They're some of the most common words that we use, and for good reason: they help us keep our speech and writing concise and varied by letting us use a placeholder instead of a name or a noun. They carry a lot of weight for their relatively small size, however. Weight that, I think, can tell us quite a bit about how some people interact with the fandom, or even identify with their personal characters.

A good place to start here, then, is how a pronoun works behind the scenes. If you were to say: “OtterFace is a river otter. He enjoys wiggling, fish, and his enormous tail,” you have stated the subject of the statement as ‘OtterFace’, and then referred to him twice using ‘he’ and ‘his’. I’ve mentioned before that one of the ways to look at how language works is by recognizing that the words we use are signs used to convey meaning. When we talk about OtterFace or his glorious tail, we’re using signs - that is, words on a screen, sounds coming from our mouths, etc. - to refer to two things that really, truly exist (or so we assume).

The job of the pronouns specifically is to be set up as a temporary sign that refers back to something earlier in the statement: ‘he’ and ‘his’ refer back to ‘OtterFace’ in the previous example. They’re a sort of sign on top of a sign, in one sense; pronouns refer back to a noun that was already used, which in turn refers to the subject. They do have a tendency to wear out over time, however. If I talk about ‘him’ here, you might understand that I refer to our wiggly otter friend, but once a new paragraph starts, it’s usually about time to restate the subject, because him has lost some of its power in referring back to OtterFace.

This is all well and good, really; it helps us keep things flowing in the language that we use. As I said, though, pronouns in many languages do carry a lot of additional weight beyond just being placeholders for a subject. The prime example of this, and the one I want to focus on, is the fact that you now know that OtterFace is male, solely based on my pronoun choice. (pronouns also carry a portion of identity with them). This is part of the burden carried by pronouns: I didn’t have to specify that OtterFace was male beyond choosing and using the proper pronouns.

Pronouns carry great importance, at least in English, by specifying the gender of the sign they replace, helping us to form a better mental picture of what is being described in words.

And here's where things get a little tricky.

One usually discusses gender with pronouns, but to be honest, "gender" in this case is divided into at least two distinct areas: gender identity and biological sex (three, if you count gender expression). However, asking a transgender person about pronouns will get you an explanation about all the ways in which that relationship between pronoun and gender is fraught. There are a lot of connotations that not everyone is comfortable with when it comes to having some things specified by so short a word, and having the wrong pronoun used when one is dealing with gender identity disorder is just one of those terribly uncomfortable things. The upside, at least in some places in furry, is that you present as your character, which can be of whatever sex you wish, making pronouns all the easier to choose, for those interacting with you.

In fact, due to the fantastical nature of the fandom (that is, of a fantasy nature, though we are fantastic as well), non-binary gender identities have flourished and make up a sizable portion of the population in some locations, far above the 1% of births that show some sort of sexual ambiguity*. These range through the whole gamut of male and female primary and secondary sexual characteristics, from primarily female to primarily male and everything in between, and various pronouns have been more or less popular in describing various areas on that spectrum.

This article on io9 goes into some of the issues on describing hermaphrodites in terms of male and female, including with pronouns; very much recommended reading. While some who present as a hermaphrodite with their character in the fandom use masculine or feminine pronouns (“male herms”, those who present as primarily male, with both sets of reproductive genitalia, or “c-boys”, males with a vulva and vagina but no penis, both tend to use masculine pronouns, for example), several use either a gender neutral pronoun set, or one that’s specific to hermaphrodites. One of the more common sets, ‘shi/hir/hirs/hirself’, seems to be fairly unique to the fandom, even, and indeed would likely only be able to flourish in a primarily written environment, due to the relative similarity of the words when spoken to ‘she/her/hers/herself’**. Others choose pronouns that have shown up elsewhere offline, such as the ‘zie/zir/zirs/zirself’ or other such gender neutral pronouns to represent someone of non-binary gender.

That leads us to non-gendered and neuter pronouns. The difference between those two terms was succinctly put when I asked a crowd online whether they preferred ‘it/it/its/itself’ or Spivak pronouns (‘e/em/eir/emself’, though the nominative is often replaced with ‘ey’, to prevent ambiguity when spoken with ‘he’). When I asked this crowd of furs, there were the response was overwhelmingly ‘it/it/its/itself’. When asked, the three furs who had their gender set to neuter and used ‘it’ for themselves explained succinctly, “I have some friends that use Spivak pronouns, but they identify more as ‘none’ than specifically ‘neuter’. ‘Neuter’ is a gender, whereas ‘none’ is more of an answer to a question.” The fandom certainly provides room for

the neutrois and the 'none's, of course, and the means of interacting online provide a way for that to be expressed as a part of oneself.

So why is this all important to furry? I think that a lot of it has to do with the ways in which we interact through avatars, our personal characters. The ability to partake in gender without necessarily involving biological sex is a definite draw to many. Disconnecting the two and, in some small way, totally presenting as who one feels one should present as in terms of gender is not that far away from presenting as what species one wishes to present as. It's no surprise, then, that expressing a different gender with a furry character is no surprise to so many; it's not that far off from what we already do. Additionally, it is a prime example of participation mystique: entangling concepts of gender with the fandom, for some, is another way in which we can base a portion of our existences on our membership to the fandom.

Of course, this isn't something that necessarily holds true for everyone, or even a majority of furies. It's not even something that everyone accepts within the fandom. I do think that it is a good example of one of the ways in which we connect with our subculture, and with each other. Something as simple as a pronoun used during interaction with another fur can be a sign of how they have made the fandom part of themselves, just as for others the spiritual aspect, or the artistic aspect, or even the sexual aspect can provide a deeply meaningful tie to something as simple as a subculture with a shared interest in anthropomorphic animals.

- This according to the (now defunct) Intersex Society of North America, which defines the term “sexual ambiguity” to include genetic issues such as Klinefelter Syndrome which may or may not present beyond simple gynecomastia in many individuals, which hardly fits the furry herm stereotype; the number of births with truly ambiguous primary sexual characteristics is quoted as being much smaller: “Between 0.1% and 0.2% of live births are ambiguous enough to become the subject of specialist medical attention, including surgery to disguise their sexual ambiguity.” (source)

** A resourceful [a][s] reader contacted me several months ago with a brief analysis on how controversial ‘shi/hir/hirs/hirself’ can be. Such pronouns can elicit quite violent responses from some individuals.

*** On Wikipedia, Gender-neutral pronouns is an exhaustive list pronouns that are neutral in gender in some way or another, and includes some pretty fascinating information and links besides. English gets quite the table, even.

Further reading

Meaning Within a Subculture- Further discussions on semiotics and linguistics.

Boys, Girls, and the In-Betweens- An early article on non-binary gender.

Again, apologies for the slowness and shortness of articles on my end, and cheers to JM for keeping things running along!

Chapter 6

Species, Gender, and Data

August 9, 2017

One of the neat things about identity is the fact that a shared identity can lead to a community.

This is the way furry works, after all. A bunch of folks all around the world started identifying with this thing. Maybe they identify as folks who see themselves as something other than human. Or maybe they identify as someone who really likes art of anthropomorphic animals. There's a lot of different ways to approach the topic of anthropomorphics.

Getting a bunch of folks together with a shared identity takes a lot of organization. That is, unless you've got the internet.

Suddenly, we start to see a community cohere out of shared identity. It's a strange attractor of sorts: folks who are outside furry but share that identity are drawn in, making the sense of community more appealing to those outside, yet still have the shared identity.

Similar things happen within the LGBT community. Parties, gay clubs, and pride parades are some of the most visible aspects of this, of course. Still, much the same happens with trans folk. There are whole houses and communities of trans people in the embodied world, and online, the community becomes even grander. We talk of the gender cascade or the transposion, the idea of “the act of seeing in others that portion of identity we find within ourselves that lends the greatest validation to our membership”. Seeing others live happily embracing their identity makes it easier to embrace our own identity.

Now, come with me on a short diversion through furry fiction.

Short fiction anthologies come and go within the fandom. There’s a schedule of regular ones, and some that are just one-offs. There’s HEAT and ROAR and FANG for some of the regular ones, and then there’s Dogs of War and Seven Deadly Sins and, shameless plug, Arcana for some of the one-offs.

They all work in fairly similar ways, too. A call for submissions will go up, say, six months ahead of time with a list of requirements - genre, rating, word count, etc. - which will give authors a chance to write or polish a story to submit. In reality, of course, that means that many authors will spend five and a half months talking about the anthology, then two scrambled weeks of intense effort pulling something together. We’re pretty predictable like that.

One of those recent calls was for an anthology of lesbian erotica. There has been an awful lot of erotica written and published, and the vast majority of it has been gay or straight (and

I'd hazard a guess that a lot of that has been gay). That would make CLAW, this anthology, the first of its kind.

The reasons for this are manifold and almost certainly not well understood.

Some of them have come up here, of course. JM wrote a few articles on gay furies and why the fandom may look appealing to them. My stock response is a hypothesis that, given the relatively even distribution furies along a scale from heterosexual to homosexual¹, along with the overwhelming majority of furies identifying as male, a majority of homosexual relationships within the subculture is to be expected. If you're a bi male fox, you're more likely to wind up in a gay relationship by virtue of your dating pool being 80%² male.

Things like that make CLAW's position as the first lesbian anthology a bit easier to understand, at least.

So! I decided to write for CLAW. I don't write much fiction. I've got one story published in the FC2016 con book, one story to be published in Arcana, and...that's it. I thought it'd be fun to give this a go. The stakes were low, the restrictions loose, and the story was fun to write.

One problem: I wanted to write a trans character into the story.

I talked with Kirisis, the editor of the anthology, and she confirmed that it would be alright, so I went ahead with my plan. The character's species was chosen out of necessity to the plot, and I didn't really give it a second thought.

At least, not until I finished the story and thought it might be fun to write another. I know, I thought. I'll write the trans character's backstory! I'll write her struggles with coming out.

I dropped that idea almost immediately. To write that story, I would have to go back further in the character's past than I really wanted. I'd have to provide her deadname. I didn't know that name. I didn't want to know that name. I was too attached to her as a person, real or not, to want to disrespect her that way.

Okaaaay, well, I'll write a different character's story!

And now, eight hundred words later, we come to our topic.

Well, that's easy. I can just find another character's voice, pick a species, and go! It all seemed so straight-forward!

Leave it to me to over-think things.

Part of the success of Kyell Gold is that the characters he writes mirror some very basic things about large enough swaths of the fandom as to give them immediate social currency. Coming out stories, the bildungsroman genre³, even the species choices, they all speak to the reader in ways that provide a sense of shared identity.

Dev the tiger and Lee the fox, Sol the wolf, Kory the otter: they're all relatable characters. The names are familiar, but more importantly, so are the species. The species all occur within the top ten most popular species in the fandom. They're all species we know.

Gold is a far, far better writer than I am, and I'm constantly learning from him, both passively and actively.

So I figured I'd give this a go: if I'm going to write a trans coming out story, I want to pick a character in which the readers can see something of themselves.

I decided to go on a dive through some of the data and see what might make this work. Using the 2016 Furry Poll, we have

data for both species and gender alignment (that is, trans- or cisgender). I usually just dump numbers in a post, but I thought it might be an interesting exercise to go through my actual process in getting those numbers.

The first thing we need to do is to loop through all of the responses we have in the database. This whole exercise takes the form of a python script; it's not very efficient, but does show the steps required.

In this snippet, we loop through all of the responses in the dataset. For each response, we grab the fields we need: gender alignment, species, and just because, gender identity.

From there, we need to take the data we've collected and boil it down to some key statistics. This mostly involves tallying-up numbers. For instance, we can find the number of cis and non-cis respondents, as well as the number of masculine and feminine respondents, including breaking those down into cis-masculine/feminine and non-cis-masculine/feminine respondents.

The species bit is a little more complicated, however. If we haven't seen a response of that species before, we have to add one to our set of species responses. We do this by adding a dict — that is, a list of keys and values (much like a dictionary, where there's the word to be defined and the definition of the word) — with the name of the species associated with some data. In this case, that data is how many respondents of that species are cis or non-cis.

For the purpose of this exercise, we're relying on the 'species category' field of the survey. These are general categories such

as “wolves” or “cats”, rather than specifics such as “maned wolves” or “panthers”.

Another thing to note is that, for the gender identity and alignment fields, respondents were allowed to enter their own answers, rather than pick from the list of available answers. If they did so, we mark their answer to that question as subjective, rather than objective. If they did so, we don’t save that data.

All data in the database is anonymous, but the subjective responses could be identifying information. All of the data published by [a][s] is stripped of subjective responses. The datasets with the subjective data are limited to researchers only.

From there, we can start printing information about our results. In order to get an overall idea of things, we begin by printing a breakdown, by gender, of cisgender respondents, non-cisgender respondents, and respondents who answered “it’s complicated”.

The term “non-cisgender” is important, as, in this instance, we’re using it as a blanket category to include transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender or neutrois, or other folks who don’t fall under the umbrella of cisgender.

Now that we’ve printed some of our basics, let’s sort our species data. We want to find the species category which contains the greatest number of cisgender respondents, as well as the one with the least. This is as easy as looping through the responses and finding the one with the most and least.

To do this, we start with some empty variables. For the most non-cis species category, we start with 0%. We loop through the data and calculate the percentage of non-cisgender respondents for that species. If that percentage is greater than the current

one (and anything's greater than our starting value of 0%), we update the variable to point to that species. If a future one is greater, we update; if not, we skip.

The same takes place with the least non-cis (or most cisgender) species, except that we start with 100% non-cis, and check if the species we're investigating is less than 100% non-cis.

Almost done! Next, we print out all of our findings. For both most and least non-cis, we print out the percentage and number of respondents.

Last step: print out the number of responses we looked at, and the number of responses with species categories.

Alright, exercise over! Let's get to the results!

Wow, uh...okay. Not quite what I was expecting!

First of all, what's otherdog?

Not much, what's other with you, dog?

Sorry.

otherdog is any dog not specifically named. We have a few that are, of course. Husky, German Shepherd Dog, and collie to be precise. otherdog is the catch-all category for breeds that don't fall into any of the specified categories.

But what's going on here?

The most cisgender species is husky. Other dogs are the least cisgender. And this is out of all species categories, of which there are 67.

Huh!

Now, let's go back through that and tick all our boxes that make this result true.

We are looking at only species with more than 100 responses. If we drop our threshold to 50, then we wind up with

kitsunes as the least cisgender species, at 34%. Perhaps this makes sense, though, for a species known for its shapeshifting and magical abilities.

We are looking only at species categories, not individual species. This means that there is likely some further variation to be had digging down a little further, but that involves coding subjective responses, and I don't really have the time or energy for that. Additionally, there are doubtless species that aren't represented here (as is shown by the other category).

We're discarding polymorphic respondents, as each would be its own species. If we allow for polymorphic respondents, polymorphic respondents are the least cis, and respondents who are at least part red fox are the most cis. The data gets muddy.

We are looking at the 2016 survey, which only gives us so much data, about 5,400 responses, only about 4,800 of which have species categories set.

And how we're here, with huskies being the most cisgender species, and other dogs being the least.

My original quest was to write a trans coming-out story that would find appeal within the fandom. One where many readers would find a bit of themselves in the main character, a character who was relatable. A lot of that's on me, writing an engaging character that mirrors others' experiences, but some of that is just in knowing one's audience, and this is just one fact I can keep in mind.

There's a lot that goes into species selection, just as there's a lot that goes into gender. We make these choices about how we represent ourselves within the fandom carefully, even if it feels

instinctive. Each aspect of our characters is representative of some aspect of ourselves. Our hopes and wishes, dreams and aspirations. Things we admire about ourselves are magnified and things that we despise about ourselves are reduced. We become the animal people we want to see in the world.

CLAW 1 is the inaugural volume of a yearly anthology of lesbian erotica edited by Kirisis “KC” Alpinus. It aims to be a showcase of healthy F/F erotica, with the secondary goal of showcasing diverse female and female-identifying authors in the fandom.

Submissions are open until September 3rd!

For more information, refer to the call for submissions.

The survey asks orientation in a sort of expanded Kinsey scale. That is, it asks whether one considers oneself heterosexual or homosexual on a seven point scale. There are other options that we add, but those aren’t really in play here for this little example.□

Again, this is a little complicated. The gist is that there are about 80% of respondents who identify as masculine in some way.□

Or bildongsroman, if you will, when it comes to erotica.□

Chapter 7

Layers of Fantasy

January 4, 2012

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

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

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

I suppose that the difference between these two views of the fandom isn't so much that we're applying our culture to a

fantasy setting versus a mundane setting, so much as how we view our focus on our characters. If one views one's character as some sort of fantastic being, some concept of self with additional elements which extend beyond the norm, it's easier to place oneself in a fantastic setting. From the other point of view, if one views one's character as one's self, simply expressed differently, or as something one possesses rather than one is, then it might feel more comfortable to exist in a setting closer to the one inhabited by the player - that is, a more mundane set of circumstances. The difference there being that there is a bit of a divide, no matter how vague, between two sides of looking at one's character - as fantasy, or as mere re-representation of self.

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

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

The downside to all of this, of course, is that it becomes difficult to maintain without potentially losing some aspect of the fantasy. A furry story set in a fantasy setting runs the risk of being a fantasy story wherein all the characters are animal people for nodiscerniblereason, or perhaps a furry story in which fantastical things keep happening with little explanation. Perhaps that's the sign of a really good furry role-player or writer, though, being able to maintain a level of coherence within all the separate layers of fantasy. The requirements for a furry fantasy to be pulled off well require miscibility: the risk is great of having a fantasy that happens to be furry or vice versa, and so it seems to be important that furry be either a strong part of

the fantasy or at least part of the plot in order for everything to work out well.

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

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

like their animal people to be pretty normal, though, and that's okay, too. It's long since gotten to the point where the fandom is big enough to hold all of us.

Chapter 8

Three Meditations

May 9, 2012

As mentioned before, I've been totally slammed by offline things over the last few weeks. It's been crazy, it's been fun, and it's certainly left almost no time for the writing process besides thinking in bed before sleep. There certainly is a place for that in writing, however, and so I hope you'll all forgive me for a post consisting mostly of introspection. Now that things have mostly cleared up, I hope that I'll be able to get back into the swing of writing about the fandom in a less navel-gazey way. Until then, here are three ideas that I've not been able to get out of my head, recently.

Process in Furry

When I was working my way through my music composition degree, I wound up fixating on one particular style of composition that has stuck with me to this day. There are as many ways of

writing music as there are composers (many more, really), but one can discern general trends in the process of creation. I've mentioned this before, actually, in the introduction to the article on meaning within the fandom. There is the watercolor method of writing, which I'm going through now: starting at the top and writing until you're finished. In contrast to that, there is the carefully sculpted architectural method of writing, where one creates a blueprint then writes an article to match.

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

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

just transformations working on the same set of material; a very strict process, as it were.

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

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

I suppose a lot of this is fairly obvious stuff, but I find it all very interesting, because of the correlation to music, another very important aspect of my life. Indeed, the parallel can be drawn through most aspects of my life, or even through trends

in history. Mostly, though, I've been thinking a lot about the idea of processes recently, though, due to the recent familial conflagration that took place at our house during the marriage, and all that lead up to it. It was easy to see it as a single event, a goal. Then I started remembering the similar gathering that took place at graduation, at various birthdays, and so on, and it became a little clearer that life is more of a process that we experience over time, rather than simple events taken out of time.

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

Evolution Within a Subculture

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

steel, titanium. We've surpassed many other species in a great many ways, arguably right up to species primacy. This is the process taken to the utmost extreme.

Similar things happen within societies, when one takes a step back inwards: civilizations rise and fall, and change with the times. The Romans, they did great! Certainly a gold star for the republic, and then the empire gets special marks for effort, to be sure. But they aren't alone, of course. The Greeks, the Tsardom of Russia, the various monarchies of Europe, and so on, have all striven forward and achieved primacy in their own times. America did likewise, and even believed strongly in its own exceptionalism for quite a while, and we shall see where that leads. Needless to say, the same sort of evolution and process holds true on a cultural level, as well as a species level. Neal Stephenson discusses this in many of his books - whether it's the Chinese tiin his book *The Diamond Age* or the struggle of societies in *The Cryptonomicon*.

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

There was, however, one invention that, at least to some extent, changed up the order a little bit, simply by virtue of ignor-

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

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

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

in many ways. Furrries are savvy, instead, in the concept of social currency within the context of their fandom.

The whole idea of social currency suddenly became much more important with the invention of the 'net. One could have all the money in the world, or only enough to afford the means with which to communicate on the 'net effectively, and one could become rich in social currency: the sharing of ideas and words with those seeking them out. It's a little bit cynical, perhaps, and not very flattering for us, but [adjective][species] acts in its own way within that structure, bolstering its own social currency by providing the ideas contained by the authors, both of articles and comments, to a wider audience - not simply forcing it on them by way of intrusive advertisements, but by making it a genuine resource available to those in search of it. We do our best to earn our social revenue, but we are, when it comes down to it, actively seeking it out.

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

The Self-Aware Fandom

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

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

haps it's a symptom of the participation mystique I've brought up before, and perhaps not, but it's worth exploring either way.

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

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

As for the second example of self deprecation, I've been watching waves of the hashtag #furriesruineverything wash over twitter over the last year or so. It began as simple snark, implying that furries really did take everything, turn it terrible,

and set it loose on the Internet, but it's since gained additional layers of meaning. It's been inverted to add some sarcasm to the mix - furies "ruin" everything, by making it better - and it's been reverted back to the idea that furies can ruin even things that aren't necessarily furry in the first place, such as Twitter, kids shows, and so on. This is only the simplest and one of the most blatant examples of the self-deprecation that seems to move through the fandom, and it's occasionally found itself tied to the first example through off-color remarks about how most furies are sexaholics, but we love them anyway.

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

Chapter 9

Spiritual Animals

May 23, 2012

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

It really seems to come down to the fact that spirituality means different things to different people, has to do with the search for meaning in things that we don't understand and don't seem to be explainable by science, and is self-referential: numinous things are spiritual, spirituality has to do with nu-

minous things. While my gut instinct tells me that the concept of a spiritual fur has been on the decline in recent years, I still see and hear mention of it quite frequently, in some form or another. Us spiritual animals have rich histories to draw on, adopt, and appropriate, not to mention the ones we create for ourselves, and we seem to have done so with a will.

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

I must add the caveat that spirituality is by no means a universal with those that identify or are interested in furies and anthropomorphics. In fact, atheists and agnostics seem to outnumber those who identify with a particular spiritual path such as Christianity or paganism. This is, of course, referring only to responses on a survey to a question utilizing the word ‘religion’ rather than spirituality, and in this respect, my gut feeling is that it’s fairly accurate. However, I do get the feeling that many

who may have responded with ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’ might still feel, in some way, spiritual. I, for example, fall within the agnostic slice of that pie (or, well, doughnut), yet still can’t deny experiences that I could only call spiritual, at least at the time. This, along with similar sentiments held by several friends, is harder to quantify, yet still a valid point to make: our reactions to the unknown and our explorations of meaning go beyond simply the actions taken to explore those things, touching also our emotional and intellectual outlook on life.

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

of Totemism: the fact that one might have a power animal, that one might share aspects of that animal's personality or physical attributes, and that one might draw personal or spiritual power from such a totem provides a clear draw for those interested in anthropomorphics.

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

These, of course, are only two examples of the way spirituality and folklore have influenced the furry fandom and woven ties deep into our subculture, influencing everything from the ways we feel about our connection to animals to something as simple (well, "simple") as character creation. Many of the most popular species out there are related in some way to a species that is important to at least one culture in a spiritual way. Wolves have their legends in both North America and Europe, horses have their adherents in Scandinavia and throughout Eurasia, foxes and coyotes have their trickster backgrounds

(not to mention jackals and many other such canids), and even kangaroos have their own legends to go with them, not to mention the spirituality that goes along with big cats all over the world.

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

This is evident beyond just the spiritual associations that are attached to certain species, though “spiritual” being such a difficult word to pin down, that’s a broad statement in itself. Many individuals may find that intensity of meaning provided by the social connotations of species that are not necessarily considered spiritual, in the traditional sense of the word (though I should note that the Wikipedia page for “tradition” is nearly as complex as that for “spirituality”). Dogs, for instance, carry significance in the society beyond the legendary, though many contemporary works have started to include some of that in their status. Specifically, dogs seem to be drifting to-

ward some apotheosis of animal companionship, as evidenced by works such as *Shiloh*, *Old Yeller*, *Lassie*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and countless others. Dogs are only one example, however; house cats, race and work horses, and many others all have built up their own social significance that adds to the meaning of the character one creates.

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

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

between the way the arctic fox's coat goes from a fluffy white to a scraggly salt-and-pepper. Even as my interest in spirituality waned over time, I still felt the need for that intensity.

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

In many bookstores, there is a certain area, usually just a shelf or section of a shelf, sometimes an entire room dedicated to the act of the practical, personal application of spiritual ideas. Many focus on meditation practices, prayer, research, manipulation of certain objects, or even diets and other practical matters. Others provide descriptions and hint at exercises intended to guide one down their own exploratory spiritual path rather than provide clear directions of one sort or another. I prowled my way through this section often through at least one period in my life. Many members of our subculture, and countless more outside the contiguous fandom, whether they identify more with therians, weres, some other subculture, or none at all, have

found a way to integrate many aspects of what is called spirituality readily into their lives, however. We seem to have done well by ourselves in that respect, making something as important as identification of a personal spirit animal, totemic guide, or other spiritual-animal connection a part of our day-to-day lives.

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

Chapter 10

Furry and Magic

August 16, 2018

I want to talk a little bit about how magical furry is.

Magic, as they say, is nothing more than an act of intent. It is “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will,” if one is to believe Crowley (not necessarily recommended). In this sense, if spells are acts of intent, then coming up with spells is the act of defining one’s intentions. In this sense, magic is living deliberately.

I’ve had a lot of thoughts like this on my mind, lately, for a lot of different reasons. Perhaps it’s worth expanding on them

It’s been some months, now, since my gender affirmation surgery. May 10th involved getting up at 5 AM - though I don’t think I slept the night before - and driving to the hospital, where I spent the day without time. I blinked, and when I opened my eyes some hours later, I had a different physical form than when I went to closed them.

I've been involved in the purchase of three houses, I've gotten married, I've moved halfway across the country, and this *still*, months later, feels like the largest intentional act that I've taken.

This is an act that stretches far beyond the necessary requirements to fulfill and complete it, in and of itself. I just "needed" letters, insurance, and time off work to complete it. More than that I actually needed was the will to perform the act, and discovering that was all that was required, I just...did it. For a long time leading up to beginning this process, I believed that it required something that I didn't have, that I could never have. When I found out that all it took was a phone call to the surgeon to get started, I leaped at the chance. Not to say that it's been easy, but neither has it required any mystical element I didn't already have.

This act goes beyond just its requirements because that act of intent itself changed me in turn (and not in the obvious surgical way). In magical systems, both in media and in the world at large, there is often a price to pay for your acts. Karma, mana drain, however you want to look at it. in the case described above, it's the fact that no act occurs in isolation, and you're going to have to live with the consequences of the act.

Sometimes these are concrete. For instance, I had to live with the pain that comes with a major surgery affecting the pelvic floor. I was limited in terms of movement for weeks after the surgery. Some of those were financial - after all, transition is incredibly expensive, even with insurance. I freely acknowledge the privilege inherent in this. I'm thankful for it, and do my best to pay it forward.

And some are less tangible.

As I mentioned back in...oh jeez, 2013 was really five years ago!? As I mentioned half a decade back, a change in species or character often happens around large life changes, and I'm no different. The process of death and rebirth that goes along with this surgery, where I die - hopefully metaphorically - on the table and am reborn, changed, is no small feat.

So it was that, shortly after my surgery consult back in 2016, I got the idea to start interacting with friends as something other than an arctic fox. More and more, I started appearing as a snow leopard (because I couldn't seem to let go of those wintry species). At first, it was an 'alt' situation: Maddy, as the snow leopard was called, was an alternate character to use when I wasn't feeling the fox.

Art by Grey White

She was different from the 'usual' in a few ways. She's cis, for one, unlike the arctic fox, who transitioned along with me. She's shorter and a bit pudgier than I am. She's happier and struggles less with mental health. She's an ideal rather than a reality, and something to be played for fun.

Or, well, she was. This 'alt' phase lasted a few months, I suppose, before I woke up one morning and realized I'd not interacted as an arctic fox in a few days. Slowly but surely, the snow leopard had started to overtake the fox.

Becoming an arctic fox, originally, was something that just sort of happened to me. Back in 2005, I was pretty firmly camped out in red fox territory with a character named Ranna, and yet, in 2006, I shifted pretty quickly away from that character to Makyo Alopex.

It took a bit of time before I figured out what the big life change was that went along with this. I finally settled on how, once my friends Ash, Shannon, and I moved to our own house, I finally felt on my own. When I was living in the dorms, I was simply ‘away from home’. Now, though, paying rent, I was well and truly moved out. No empty nester, my mom greeted the news that I wasn’t coming home for the summer with joy, telling me, “Good, now you can take the rest of your stuff.”

Art by n

2005 and 2006 were the years I finally started to grow up, and so that was the end of Ranna. 2017 and 2018 have been the years I’ve started living pretty authentically as a woman - visibly trans, sure, but also visibly feminine. This upcoming surgery has been something of a final blow to Makyo Alopex as a character, or at least as a main.

One of the downsides to the end of Ranna, is that it happened very suddenly, and not at all deliberately. Which, come to think of it, also applies to me moving out on my own and starting to grow up. It felt like an accident, slipping away from who I used to be.

My goal is to avoid that with the change from arctic fox to snow leopard. This is, as with surgery, a process of death and rebirth. Makyo Alopex is dying, in many senses of the word, and being reborn in Makyo Uncia, called Maddy. I have intent here, more than I did when I left Ranna behind. I have the will, in Crowley’s terms, and the ability to make it manifest.

Art by Cadmium Tea

I took this as an almost alchemical act. After all, alchemy is more than just transmuting literal lead into literal gold. It’s

the transmutation of a base substance into something better. Through calcination and dissolution, the base - the *prima materia*, the self, the fox - is broken down. Through separation, conjunction, and fermentation, something new is compiled from what was in rough shapes. Through distillation and coagulation, the new self - the cat - is solidified, completed, made whole.

As with a lot of how I experience furry, this is a microcosm, rather than something unique. I am not the only one to be deliberate about changing my species, just as I'm not the only one to read way too much into the furry fandom.

Furry, as a whole, is an exercise in self-actualization. It is taking the idea of "this is how I want to be seen" to places and extents not often tread.

Through each aspect of ourselves, we choose how we want to interact. We choose a species, we choose a name, we choose what aspects of our personalities to show to each other and the world. We construct and create every day of our lives, and we're made all the better for it.

Shameless boosterism aside, we're good at what we do and what we make, whether that's art or fun or just ourselves. The more we create, the better we get at it, too. All that's left to do is to keep on creating, to keep putting our intent and our will to work.

Just as I can dig into the intent behind changing a name, a fursona, an identity, I can look for the magic of self-actualization within furry as a whole. After all, furry is magic.

How do you experience the magic of furry? Let us know in the comments!

Chapter 11

Subconscious Aspects of the Fandom

September 23, 2012

Did you know that I used to read tarot cards? I still have the embarrassingly large collection of decks, books, and other accessories that go along with the practice. I pull them out every now and then to remember the person that I used to be. I used to be intensely focused on the subconscious and all of the ways in which it wound itself through our waking lives. I used to daydream about spending the requisite hours necessary for a 78 card spread using every card in the standard deck, even if I only did it once. At one point, I even vowed to do one reading for myself a day for 78 days in order to write a book about the experience (an idea that crops up with just about every interest I pick up, I should note).

I've talked about change before, and I have even laid bare some of the changes I have gone through personally. Even

though my fascination with tarot has waned, I still retain the general interest in the ways in which the subconscious works in our lives, and I can still appreciate the deep symbolism that goes along with it. I would be lying, in fact, if I were to say that there wasn't some subconscious link tying me to the furry fandom. And, having had a few conversations on that point, I think that the same holds true for a lot of us here. What, then, might be some of the subconscious reasons for wanting to join in a fandom of like minded individuals, spending hours online or sometimes hundreds (or thousands) of dollars just for the chance to interact in person at a convention? What would pull someone to a loose-knit group of individuals with the general theme-in-common of totally digging animals anthropomorphized to some extent, or perhaps humans similarly zoomorphized? It is, of course, one of those questions that has a different answer (or perhaps several) depending on who you ask, but I think that they are likely to fall into several loose categories.

First, though, I think it's beneficial restrict ourselves a little in order to focus better on the task at hand. There are quite a few reasons that someone might wish to join in a subculture, be around close friends, construct a chosen family for themselves; let's set those aside, however, and focus on the reasons that someone might be willing to construct for themselves an avatar through which they may interact with others. While it's certainly not a universal in our fandom, I do think that character creation and interaction are still quite common, and figure large in the ways in which we communicate, even if it is only to purchase art.

One of the reasons that immediately springs to mind for me is escapism. This requires a little bit of explanation on how I really got into the fandom in the first place, though, and I hope you'll forgive the brief digression. Around about the second half of 2000, a lot of things happened at once within my mom's side of the family (my parents having originally gotten divorced when I was quite young), and the tension between my mom and then step-dad grew daily, eventually to the dissolution of that marriage as well. The first of the divorces happened when I was too young to remember, but the second occurred near the beginning of high school. I had just come out as, at the time, homosexual, as well, and the combined stress led to a strong desire to escape to some sort of place where these issues didn't loom quite so large.

I think that this was a common theme among several of my friends within the fandom at the time, as well. Although, by virtue of being able to even escape onto the Internet to pretend to be animal people, we led rather privileged lives, we all had stresses of a sort, or own realities looming over us, providing the desire to escape into a fantasy world. I've mentioned before the startling banality of a lot of this fantasy in which we took part, with folks hanging out in parks or bars, being students or programmers, and I think that reflects a bit of that escapism: getting away from a hectic life to take part in what your segment of society views as normal. To fantasize about normalcy, even with that element of magical realism inherent in being a fox-kid, shows the need to get away from life as it stands.

Of course, despite the normalcy striven for by the crowd that I hung out with, there are certainly more fantastic elements

to the fandom. With character creation and world building, just about anything is possible, anywhere from simple non-binary gender roles to plant-cats and digital-huskies, from vast changes in financial class and social status to vast changes in size, even whole constructed realms with a fleshed out back-story, rules, or laws of physics. Beyond simply being happily normal, fantasy can satisfy out sense of grandeur.

Many individuals have a need to better themselves in any number of ways: to become thinner, to get rich, to win friends or defeat enemies. Fantasy provides one outlet for this. Through the process of character creation, one can construct an avatar that fills this need for grandiosity. By becoming, however temporarily or shallowly, a fantastic entity, we can satisfy some of our mythic desires.

This need to better ourselves needn't be on either extreme, of course. For many, simply the feeling of fulfillment involved in creating the person that we really wish to be is enough. For myself, I think this is of prime importance. Now that I've grown up, left college behind, and moved away from family (thank goodness), furry has taken on less of the escapist overtones and simply become the place where people can strive to be what they wish to be. Much of the psychological reasons for this were covered in JM's previous post on how our fursonas are happier than we are.*

This was hammered home recently when I received word of a good friend's passing. Although he and I hadn't had much of a chance to interact in the past few years since he joined the army, prior to that he was someone that I looked up to and trusted in a sort of chosen-family, big-brother way. In fact, there are

several people like that still in my life, those friends, usually older than myself, whom I sort of adopted as people to follow back when I was in that escapist mode. Thinking about this after my friend's death originally made me feel a little guilty, a little creepy; it honestly made me feel like kind of a sad person for having been raised by a bunch of older gay guys pretending to be animal people in an Internet gay bar.

In the end, though, we all grow, change, and mature over time, and I think that I've come out alright. Rather than focusing on living a normal life online, I'm lucky enough to be living something like that in person in my own way, and my interactions with others through an avatar have reflected that. The death affected me deeply due to it being a rather blatant signal of that change, and now I know that I'm using the fandom more to help fulfill my needs to become what I want to be: not a fox person, per se, just my ideal self. This goal of fulfillment is something that I see in a lot of people within the fandom, too. Beyond simply playing an anthropomorphic animal, they are playing what they wish to become.

These are just a few of the important factors of draw to the fandom, of course. Part of the whole reason of [a][s]'s existence in the first place is to try to explore those factors. I had originally thought that it might have lasted for a few articles and then devolved into a current-events site, or maybe into just reviews of all the wonderful creations out there. The cool part about our subculture, however, is that we truly do become part of it, and for all sorts of reasons. These reasons, these draws, these subconscious aspects of our participation all shape the way we interact with each other through our chosen and cre-

ated avatars, and help shape those avatars in turn on a very fundamental level. I encourage everyone to consider the subconscious aspects of why they are involved with the fandom: that sort of introspection is always quite valuable.

- I should note that, as I was travelling for work, I wrote this on the plane before getting a chance to read JM's delightful article. I apologize if this seems a bit repetitive!

Chapter 12

Adding Structure to Life

June 12, 2013

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 by 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 cliché, 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 through a similar period, but it occurred alongside a work trip to Copenhagen that left me no room for myself. Heathrow's terminal 5, with its 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 in the middle of this, but it was out in Cali-

foria, 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', 'sub-culture', 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 our 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.

Chapter 13

Furry Mythology

February 26, 2014

One day, a fox and a cat were walking through a field. The cat seemed unusually distracted, however, despite the fox's animated conversation. While the fox surely noticed, she did her best to try and draw the cat out through sheer ebullience. It had worked in the past, why not now?

"What's bothering you?" the fox asked, relenting.

"Oh, it's nothing," said the cat.

"Come on, if it was nothing, you wouldn't be such a sourpuss, now, would you?" the fox joked.

The cat was unamused. "It's...really nothing. I can't say. It's a secret."

"That's three things. Is it nothing, can you not say, or is it a secret?"

The cat blushed in his ears, "It's a secret."

“Can you tell me?” asked the fox.

“No, then it wouldn’t be a secret anymore!”
frumped the cat.

The fox and the cat walked on in silence for a bit. The secret was clearly bothering the cat, but the fox couldn’t think of how to help.

“I know,” said the fox, brightening up. “You can tell your secret to my tail. Not even I know what my tail thinks. You can get it off your chest, and no one need actually learn your secret.

The cat thought for a moment, and then nodded, “Okay, but put your paws over your ears!”

The fox put her paws over her ears and stood still, admiring the scenery, while the cat put his muzzle in the dense fur of the fox’s tail and whispered his secret, weaving it through the fur. The fox heard nothing but the rustle of pawpads in fur, the cat felt immensely better getting whatever it was off his chest that he needed to, and the tail, to this day, has never let slip the cat’s secret. That is why it is said that a good way to feel better is to weave your secrets through a fox’s tail: they will surely be kept safe with not even the fox knowing them.

The idea of considering furry from a mythological standpoint springs from a few discussions over the last month or so with a friend (who has written for [a][s] before) about the ways in which we consider the bigger-picture topics of the fandom. Drilling down deep into the realm of data is certainly a worthy

exercise, as all of those details help fill out the picture we carry in our heads, but just as worthy is exploring that overview we carry along with us as a whole.

The contiguous furry subculture has relatively little in the way of its own mythology. This is almost certainly an aspect of a subculture, rather than something specifically furry, but no less worth investigating for that - after all, we, as furries, are the ones who have to live with a relatively sparse mythology. What exactly are the ramifications of that?

I know that there has been a lot of discussion recently, here on [a][s] and elsewhere, about what exactly makes a furry, what the fandom is, and so on. Better minds than mine have tackled this question, and so I defer to them in all cases. However, for the purpose of this article, I'm going to talk strictly about what I've called "the contiguous fandom" in the past. That is, I'm going to talk about self-identified furries - those who call themselves members of our subculture and participate with that in mind. While I feel that several of our articles might have wider reach without that consideration, I also feel that the idea of limitations on one's own work are a good way to keep that work from getting out of hand. To use a bit of jargon from work, I'd really like to avoid scope creep. With that in mind, let's consider the question of mythology and membership.

Anthropomorphism and mythology are deeply entwined. So deeply entwined that I had to stop and think for a few minutes on how to even start that sentence: "is anthropomorphism subordinate to mythology, or is it the other way around?" One need only do the briefest of investigations into most any culture's mythos in order to come across some instance of anthropomor-

phized animals. Similarly, one need only do a bit of research to find some bit of mythology surrounding just about any animal one comes across. Some of these are specific, some referenced only vaguely, but the large majority of them surround archetypes embodied by those species.

Furry, as a whole, does not have much in the way of myths. There is likely a very good reason to this, which I'll get to in a bit, but first I think it's worth disentangling 'myth' and 'archetype'. A myth is a story bearing social weight. It's not a story that's important to society per se, though sometimes it is also that, but it is one of the components that add cohesion to society. Knot is an example of a modern myth which greatly exemplifies this concept. Unlike an epic, which often includes concepts of redemption and rebirth, myths usually surround one literary conflict and do not always resolve that conflict. In Knot, the conflict is the princess's sadness - or, more broadly, the concept of depression - which, while not destroyed utterly as it might be in an epic, is at least resolved with some sort of moral; here: not bottling up your sadness. Myths are often the vehicles for lessons, in that way.

Archetypes, however, are more like the characters within myths. It's not to say that, for instance, Coyote is an archetype, but rather that Coyote embodies the Trickster archetype. The very idea of someone clever, resourceful, not always successful but never daunted by failures - that is the archetype, Coyote is the actor, and the myths in which he plays a part are the vehicles for the lessons they mean to teach. Metamyths build on top of this as a plot element, but often include several of the same aspects as myths themselves (Snowcrash and The Diamond Age

by Neal Stephenson touch on this, and Gunnerkrigg Court by Tom Siddell is a good example).

Furry has its own set of archetypes. Some of these are an artifact of what I'd call the A-Z divide. That is, while we broadly describe our subculture in terms of anthropomorphism, it often plays out more like zoomorphism. That is, rather than necessarily giving animals human traits, we take our regular human interacts and mix in animal traits - mostly desirable ones - that lead to a coherent story. We tell our tales of human life, except with animals, or in rarer cases, involve species as a mechanic: fennecs who hear all, the canid sense of smell, and so on.

Apart from those, however, we have come up with a few different sources for our own archetypes. One that might actually have its roots in the early days of the furry fandom is the idea of "The Sexy Anubis", though finding the actual original source material must be left as an exercise for the reader. Although there are surely those who have found Anubis, or at least the figure thereof, if not the god himself, attractive, just as surely as there have been other modern re-tellings of his role (*American Gods* by Neil Gaiman being an obvious example), our subculture seems to have taken this and ran with it, creating a figure that features widely in erotic art and comics. This extends beyond Anubis, of course, on to Renamon, Krystal, and so on; as well as beyond sexuality, as is evidenced by some species which wind up in tribal situations more often than others (otters and wolves, I'm looking at you).

This leads me to the next source, which is that of repurposing appropriation. I've talked about appropriation more in depth before, but it plays a specific role at times when cre-

ating an archetype to be used by the community at large. Some of this shows in the ways in which we select our mythical creatures as characters: Lunostophiles, with whom I had the original conversation, is a Cheshire cat, and brings up that there are rather a lot of those, as well as gryphons, dragons, and centaurs, but not as many minotaurs, sea monsters, or mandrake roots. Much of this is due to how poorly these would fit in with the rest of the culture that we've built up: one usually without humans, whether or not they have the heads of bulls, one that takes place on land, and one requiring mobility.

Finally, there the archetypes based in part on fact, whether or not it has been proved. The ideas of lone wolves or strict pack hierarchy among wolves have been disputed by science, yet still play a firm role within our subculture. Although I've yet to run into any lemmings within furry, I would not be surprised if similar attitudes surrounded them based on popular knowledge, or even widely available fictional resources, such as the Redwall series.

In the end, perhaps this is one thing that keeps us a subculture, subservient to other cultures' mythos, instead of something higher. Taken this way, the lack of canon becomes less defining. There are other subcultures that lack a canon, such as gay culture in America in the 70s and 80s, yet which retain visible archetypes. However, it may simply be a subculture thing to lack myths. I've bookended this article in my own poor attempt at a myth that might be found within furry, but it's really sort of a stab in the dark, not based on any existing archetypes.

How about you, dear readers? What archetypes do you see within furry? What myths are there, whether or not they exist yet? Share, share!

One day, the fox was walking along the edge of the meadow, but kept getting scared and anxious. On one side of her was the meadow, but she felt open and exposed there, too easily seen. On the other side was the forest, which, while cooler than the sunny meadow, was also fraught with shadows and, as she imagined, many lurking things.

The fox hadn't always been this anxious, but ever since word had spread that the cat had felt so much better after weaving his secrets in her tail, so too had the wolf, the rat, and the dragon, each pulling her aside to have her put her paws over her ears and unburden themselves of their secrets. The fox was proud of her role and did her best to keep the secrets safe.

The longer she walked, the more she bushed her tail out to try and make sure that the secrets were well-hidden.

Eventually, the fox met up with her brother and they both continued along the path. The fox's brother, noticing his sister's tail all fluffed up, asked, "Did you get shocked by lightening? Your tail is all puffed up!"

The existence of a secret is half of its betrayal, and so the fox thought quickly, before shrugging

broadly, “Oh, I just brushed it, and that always leaves it feeling so matted down, so I figured I’d let it air out some in the shade sometimes, and in the sun sometimes. It feels good!”

The fox’s brother gave her an odd look, but she did have a point - he had just brushed his tail and it did feel rather stuffy. He bristled his fur out as well and walked with his sister between sun and shade.

”Besides,” he thought, ”This will help keep safe all of the secrets I have in my tail from my sister who can never know.” For he too held the confidence of many, but was always careful to keep it secure. This is why a fox’s tail will puff out when they feel anxious or threatened.

Chapter 14

Enjoying the Problematic

September 14, 2014

Recently, on [a][s], I wrote about the ways in which one may interact with furry in different ways, and how these little trends within the larger trend of furry (such as the micro/macro communities, etc.) lead to a more durable fandom overall. I stick by these words, too. As is often mentioned by countless members of our subculture, I think that the furry fandom itself gains much of its strength from the fact that it lacks a central canon. As a result, we find it easy to create our own microcosms within the microcosm of furry, and these may often flourish, sometimes despite the problems inherent in their existence.

It's often my habit to talk about taking a step back and looking at something from an outside point of view, and that's no different here. I want to take a step back and look at some of the problematic aspects of sexuality within the fandom. That the fandom intersects with sexuality in many ways is hardly surprising anymore, but the intersection between sexuality and

problematic content is something that occurs on a very fundamental level within society, and so it's worth taking a look at the ways in which furry sexuality can be problematic.

Someone I don't even remember following just retweeted a bunch of RL animal dicks now I know who to unfollow. Also feel kinda sick.

— Yackal (@Irid0n) September 7, 2014

The most obvious instance of the problematic within furry is that of problematic content. Zoophilia, which was tackled in this article by JM is probably one of the bigger subjects that registers as problematic to most people, as the reaction by Iridon above shows. As JM mentions in the opening line of his article, zoophilia is fairly visible within furry in a great many ways, from the art, to the members of the fandom interested in the subject. Zoophilia strikes many as problematic due in part to the issue of consent - never mind whether or not your partner issues consent, how can sex be seen as consenting when your partner is not even capable of *giving* consent?

Along similar lines is the proliferation of cub porn within our subculture. This also touches on consent out of the understanding that underaged characters may not understand sexuality full enough to be able to give informed consent - or to deny giving consent - when necessary. In JM's treatment of the subject, he brings up Dan Savage's idea of "gold-star pedophiles", as individuals who, while they enjoy the idea of sexual acts with underaged people, never act on the urges, which can be seen as a way of addressing and responding to the problematic nature of

cub porn. It's a way to address one's urges without acting them out in a situation where consent cannot be assured to be given.

More general than problematic content is the idea of problematic trends or sub-subcultures within the furry subculture. While many of these may revolve around content, I want to distinguish these as being more general: these trends may revolve around kinks, body types, or various other aspects of sexuality, and tend to be the kernel at the center of sub-subcultures within the fandom - tight- or loose-knit groups that form out of a shared interest in a particular topic.

One of these trends was called out in a self-styled "rant" by the user rampack at Weasyl, and specifically called out the use of the terms "herm", "shemale", and "cuntboy" as being problematic. The trend of characters that mix both primary and secondary sexual characteristics of both classical biological sexes within furry is nothing new, and has been around at least since I joined the fandom, nearly fifteen years ago. It was enlightening for me, seeing an explanation of why something that is seen almost as commonplace within our subculture is problematic, and seeing the discussion that the post engendered. Feelings are strong on both sides of the issue.

Another instance of a trend being called out as problematic comes from furry writer Robert Baird in an excellent essay on the act of checking his own privilege when it comes to the fact that some of his stories include non-consensual or what appear on the surface to be non-consensual sex (I know that sounds weasely for me to say, but I'm trying not to spoil some of his very well written stories; I promise it fits in well with the plot) and even things such as cheating and impregnation. The essay,

in part, describes the ways in which a creator of content that follows a problematic trend must at the very least acknowledge the problematic nature of their works. The essay itself is about much, much more than just that, as I'll bring up later, but worth a read all the same.

A third way in which the problematic intersects with furry is that of problematic creators. This is hardly intended to be a call-out post, so I won't use any names; I simply want to discuss the way in which people who can be seen as problematic are seen within the fandom by their audiences, whether intended or not.

On sharing a picture that I found attractive, not too long ago, I was filled in on the story of the artist by a friend of mine. The artist, it seems, had fetishized the concept of rape, and even though not all of their art included depictions of it - a majority of their pictures did not - the idea of rape and non-consensual sex came up often in their interactions with my friend. In the end, my friend calmly and politely cut contact, but the fact of the fetishization of something they viewed to be damaging and inappropriate stuck with them, enough that they shared their thoughts with me when I posted that picture to twitter. It made me question my own enjoyment of the artist's subject matter

Some instances of a problematic creator are even more stark than that, however. What does one do about the creations of an artist who actually is a rapist? Or one who has been accused of domestic assault? Or of theft, or of bribery, or of racism? At what point does the artist's actions start to influence the art that they make, and, as a completely separate question, at what point does it start to affect one's enjoyment of the creations?

It's not a simple set of questions, and the answers will vary not only by creator, but also by consumer, and factors outside the creator-consumer relationship.

So what does it mean to enjoy problematic things? As Robert Baird puts it in his essay, "Attempting to police what people like is a fool's errand indulged only by the recreationally irate". The things we like are, simply, the things we like. Our preferences are rarely consciously chosen, and may often wind up being problematic. While that's certainly okay - there's nothing wrong with liking the things you like - it raises all sorts of questions:

- Should you support the work with money? Example: Would you pay to own a copy of Chinatown, or merely watch it when it came on television?
- Do you differentiate works from different eras in the creator's life? For example, if you have a favorite book and over time the creator turned progressively homophobic, can you cherish the work written before that transformation, or do you judge it by the author's "final form," as it were?
- How much weight should you give to historical context?
- How much do you care about a creator's personal life?
- Does it matter whether the creator is living or dead?

(This list comes from an excellent essay on the subject by writer John Scalzi, and is definitely worth the read.)

Consciously chosen or not, what is needed is conscious treatment of the subject - whether it's a piece of media, a subject matter, or a problematic creator. Although it may be easier to simply enjoy something without thinking about the consequences of that thing in particular, it's important to our interaction with those around us and our place within a culture, subculture, or interest group not to treat things in so cavalier a manner. An essay puts this in an elegant three part list, which is worth reading on its own for the author's explanations of each of these items:

1. Acknowledge that the thing you like is problematic, and do not make excuses for it.
2. Do not gloss over issues or derail conversations about the problematic elements of the content.
3. Acknowledge other interpretations of the media you like, even if they're less favorable.

What this boils down to, really, is not sweeping the problematic aspects of the media, trend, or person under the rug: it needs to be acknowledged, it needs to be discussed fairly and openly, and one needs to be open to other interpretations and criticism of the thing one enjoys. It's sort of a way of challenging doxa, when it comes down to it. One might accept the fact that herms are just a part of the furry fandom, always have been, and always will be, but one needs to take a step back and under-

stand that the word and the concept are problematic for a good number of people, a thing that's worth keeping in mind and not dismissing out of hand.

In the end, it is important to, in the words of Anita Sarkeesian, "remember that it is both possible (and even necessary) to simultaneously enjoy media while also being critical of its more problematic or pernicious aspects". The point is never to condemn the idea of enjoying something that you find enjoyable, but simply be aware of the conversation surrounding it.

Chapter 15

On Postfurry

June 17, 2015

I'm not really sure how I wound up getting involved with the postfurry community. I mean, I can point to the moment that I found furry itself and how what went from a curious interest built into something decidedly more (a passion? an obsession?), but the same isn't necessarily the case with postfurry. If I start tracing the lines backwards, rather a lot of them converge on one critter in particular, Indi.

Indi (art by Cinna
)

Indi has been a friend for quite a while now, actually. Ve is most often seen around as a synthetic coyote-otter hybrid - a coyotter, or simply yotter - with glowy markings that range from cyan to blue to purple. Indi, being synthetic, along with ver gender identity, is the source of ver pronouns, ve/ver/vis.

I think I've known ver for about two or three years and we've connected on a lot of different levels, from our shared inter-

est in mead and other tasty drinks, to our paths along the road to genderqueer identities that share many similarities. We've acted as part of a support network for each other with some frequency, and that, probably more than anything else, served as what passes for my entry point to postfurry.

The Vixen Who Was A Lava Lamp

Years before, I remember telling a friend of mine that I felt more like a post-furry, not knowing that the term was already in use. I had meant post-furry in the sense that post-rock is (often) an intentional dissection of rock, or that postmodern art is (often) an intentional examination of art. Something meta, something self-referential.

"Oh god," was his response. "Not, like...really a postfurry, though? They're all toasters or lava lamps or something."

Sure enough, an initial Google search turned up a lava lamp vixen(which is currently the featured image on the Postfurry page on Wikifur). I didn't experience the eye-rolling that my friend perhaps expected; furry isn't exactly the internet punch-line it used to be. I was hardly leaping into the scene, much like how I leapt into furry itself, but neither was I dismissive. Something about the combination of aesthetic, ethos, and community that was attached to what I found kept cropping up in things that I enjoyed and people that I talked to.

Similar to my inability to place my entry point into this sector of our subculture, I find it incredibly difficult to pin down exactly what postfurry is.

The funny thing about social - anthropological? sociological? - research is that you often wind up with at least two kinds of data: descriptions or observations of a trend, and descriptions

or observations of reactions to a trend. This is often the case with fashion trends, as well. For instance, ‘hipster’ and ‘emo’ are burdened both with a complex internal definition, and a complex external definition, the latter of which is often used to other the subject or subjects. As an acquaintance put it:

‘[E]mo’ is an essentially meaningless way to say ‘that is too coded-gay for me but I’m not actually gonna risk censure for saying something overtly homophobic.’

Similarly, I found the external view of “postfurry is a bunch of weird toaster cats and lava lamp vixens” to be as much, if not more coherent than the complex internalized definition of postfurry itself. That’s not to say that there isn’t some truth to this viewpoint - certainly there’s evidence already of lava-lamp critters, but the more I delved into it, the wider variety of individuals I met, many of whom were indeed synthetic, but also several who tested the boundaries of the organic or spiritual. Many who viewed postfurry from the outside had much more concrete ideas of what is involved in the community, almost to the point of caricature.

Equations

On the surface, it seems that the ethos of postfurry can be described by an equation:

$$\text{furry} \times ((\text{posthumanism} + \text{transhumanism}) / 2 + \text{postmodernism})$$

Meanwhile, the aesthetic tends towards:

$$\text{furry} \times ((\text{cyberpunk} + \text{magical realism} + \text{rave wear} + \text{fetish wear}) / 4)$$

Equations like these are, of course, patently meaningless in any mathematical sense, but they serve as pretty good analo-

gies, as well as a way to demonstrate the complexity of the internal definition of postfurry.

I think that it's important here to note that ethos and aesthetic are worth defining separately, as well as together. Just as with 'hipster' and 'emo' above, the two are often lumped together. Hipster, for instance, is often shortened to 'dressing ironically', when, in fact, the aesthetic revolves around very specific fashion trends and the ethos is more about enshrining irony rather than simply being ironic.

Similarly, I think it's worth looking at the way postfurry treats the disposition of its community as separate from (although related to) the things that inform the way the community members look. The fact that transhumanism - that is, moving beyond what it means to be human - informs a lot of the cyberpunk look is undeniable, but the two are also separate in their own way. Of course, there are other things that draw those with an interest in a cyberpunk aesthetic to postfurry beyond just the transhumanist leanings, and ditto with magical realism and postmodernism, and so on.

The postfurry aesthetic is more nuanced than simply "grim middle-future with lots of neon". There is some of that, to be sure, but that's not the whole. The second equation mentions rave and fetish wear, and both of those do indeed play a role in building up the look and feel of postfurry. These, I think, are analogues for a much broader interest in sensory excess. The bright colors; the cuffs, collars, and corsets; the furs that smell of vanilla, taste of peppermint, or whose aroma changes with mood; all of these bespeak more than an interest in the senses,

but a reveling in the myriad ways with which we interact with each other.

Making Oneself

Another way to look at it, however, would be the relationship between self-actualization and an extension of furry.

One thing I've noticed that figures large in the postfurry community is the idea that there should not be anything that stands between who you are and who you want to be. I know, that's a really vague sentiment, and it really is sentimental, but just as the hipster ethos enshrines irony, so to does postfurry tend to enshrine self-actualization.

A good example of this is shown by what is happening with ideas surrounding identity in the postfurry community. An informal observation shows that postfurries tend to be queer, tend towards polyamory, and tend to explore gender far more than the population at large, and even more than furry as a whole.

More specifically, I would estimate that a good seventy-five to eighty percent of the postfurry community is transgender, non-binary, or otherwise genderful or genderless. In fact, within the postfurry Slack* community, there are no less than three different gender-related channels focusing on various aspects of gender identity, expression, and the intersection with sexuality.

This trend even has a name within the community, the Gender Cascade (though 'transpolsion' was also suggested). In fact, this surrounds much of how Indi and I began talking in earnest. As we both of us began to explore gender identity and expression, we began sharing with each other the steps we were tak-

ing, encouraging each other and showing each other how easy various things were. We even helped me with portions of the Furry Poll, designing and implementing the gender coordinates widget there.

Becoming Oneself (art by Mandi Tremblay

)

That tendency to pull together into a community is what helps keep this Gender Cascade cascading. When others see that androgyny is not out of reach, that becoming oneself is not impossible, they too begin exploring, and encouraging others.

This is all in person, I should note. I know that's a distinctly furry problem to have, but none of what I've mentioned so far has pertained to the avatars which members of the post-furry community construct for themselves. Or, rather, none of it *solely* pertains. For many of the members of the community, it's an all-that-plus-more sort of situation. There's a distinct focus on self-actuation through storytelling and world building. It's the rule, rather than the exception to it, that members of this community-within-a-community have a story to go along with their character, a world within which they live, and a manual (however informal) for how to interact with them, whether that's in character or out of character.

This is hardly unique to postfurries, of course - I don't mean to claim such. One need only look at the extent of the world building that takes place on Taps or any other general-purpose furry venue to see that that's not the case. What I'm trying to get at, however, is that the intensity with which members of the postfurry community build their characters, story, and world is

unique. It is transgressive in that it readily crosses the boundary between character and player.

As I mentioned before, there's another way to look at post-furry, focusing more on the aesthetic, and that is as an extension of furry. This fits pretty well with several other trends that start with 'post-'.

It's easy to see how postfurry could have started as gently mocking the furry fandom and its prevalent aesthetics. As Flip mentioned in his dissection of the modern furry aesthetic, much of the contemporary furry style has its roots in the styles that accompanied late golden-era science fiction and fantasy from the seventies, which was in turn influenced by the golden age itself.

With this in mind, it's not hard to see the general progression of furry to postfurry following similar lines as the progression from golden-age science fiction to cyberpunk, only a few decades later.

From that progression come the relevant next steps of irony, and irony subverted into a desire for authenticity, trending heavily toward the latter, even elevating earnestness itself. In this sense, a lava lamp vixen makes perfect sense early in the history of postfurry, as does a neoprene robot otter with an intense backstory later on.

This can also be seen as tongue-in-cheek subversions. For instance, the postfurry aesthetic might be described as a response to the dominant furry aesthetic of the time. While the dominant aesthetic might have been a posed pin-up of a fox ready for *The Sex*, the postfurry version would have the same fox in the same pose, but he's there because he's been hypnotized. In this sense,

postfurry can be seen as a sort of self-aware casting of furry, beginning as tongue-in-cheek mocking, moving through parody, into a turning into a legitimate deconstruction.

Fucking Sparkledogs, now in handy cross-stitch form factor
(by Lunostophiles)

Of course, the transmission of knowledge works both ways. For me, years ago, a lava lamp vixen was something totally out of the norm - and indeed there is much wariness of the normative even today within postfurry - but such things have made their way back into the wider furry aesthetic of today, to the point where we can even say things like “fucking sparkledogs” with the same gleeful irony one might use when uttering “fucking hipsters”.

All of these points, and more, were brought up over the course of a week or so of heated discussion among members of the postfurry community on Slack, Twitter, and one-on-one. It’s both the varied responses to “what does it mean to be a post-furry?” and the intensity with which the respondent answers that helps to enumerate the fact that, even though it has more specificity than furry as a whole, the postfurry segment is just as fragmented

In context

Although this article has been in my docket for quite a while, the thing that finally got me off my excessively fuzzy backside to write it was Mike Rugnetta’s talk at the XOXO Festival in 2013. I’m not even going to hide this in a link, as I think it’s far, far too important to the topic at hand to ignore. I’ll just wait here while you watch it. Go ahead, I’ve got time; I’m a fictional fox on the internet.

Watched it? Good! I'm glad, it means a lot to me!

There are three related things that I want to cover as I wrap this up, and I think that they're all related.

The first is the concept of desire paths and how that relates to fandom. There are times in life when you take a short cut simply because it will get you there faster. That's different from a desire path, though. A short cut is a less-travelled route that will get you somewhere quicker, but a desire path is the way you take that fits your own needs and wants. Sometimes they're shorter, but often they're not.

I think this idea is important on all sorts of levels. It's important to identity as a whole, for we often do things to help match our reality with our identities. It's important within furry, as well, but more so, it's important to postfurry within the context of furry. This is what I mean by the intent inherent in postfurry: it's not simply following the route of furry, just as furry is not simply following the route of mundane life. Instead, it is going out of one's way to follow the path one desires whether or not it lines up with the one that is accepted more widely.

This brings me to point number two: disintermediation.

Disintermediation is the act of removing an intermediary that had otherwise been required to complete an act. It's often described as "cutting out the middle man". Often this is intensely visible. For instance, there could be a service that delivers groceries to your door, but then your supermarket starts providing that service for themselves, thereby obviating the middle man in the cycle. That is disintermediation.

In a lot of cases, however, this is less visible than we think. There are aspects of fandom that rely intensely on canon. Some-

one's gotta write and illustrate the comic books, someone needs to hire the cast and crew to film the show, someone needs to write the novels. All of this needs to take place before fandom can happen, before fanfiction and cosplay become a thing. Furry sidesteps a lot of this - it is disintermediated - by not having many of the characteristics of a fandom without having a canon or anything to really be a fan of (this is why I often say "furry subculture" instead of "furry fandom").

Even so, as the quip goes, furies are fans of each other. This leads to a set of unspoken behaviors and an ethos that are considered normative. And just as canon can lead to head canon - alternative, transgressive, or subversive stories come up by fans to explain or change aspects of canon to fit their own narrative - a normative culture leads to alternate, transgressive, or subversive takes on that dominant ethos driving subcultures within it. I should note, this does not mean that postfuries are separate from furies - they are still furies in that they're all fans of each other, even of the wider culture of furry - but rather that, in an attempt to be more true to their engagement with the interest, they have removed the intermediation of the dominant ethos of furry to create their own.

Finally, a lot of what this leads to - the payoff, for lack of a better term - is that postfurry has developed into an intentional community. This has evolved over time, to be sure, from the interactions on Puzzlebox MUCK, to the construction of Transliminal, to the creation of the Postfurry Muck, the establishing of the Slack community, and so on.

Almost two dozen postfuries live within the bounds of this map, at about 7 miles on a side.

Transliminal is the important bit here that I want to bring up, though. More than simply creating their own spaces within the furry space online - something which takes place in any community large enough to support schisms, fractures, and sub-subcultures - the postfurry scene has started to coalesce into a very literal interpretation of 'intentional community', a sort of furry collective known as Transliminal**. At time of writing, there are something like eight postfurry households (plus even a business or two) with nearly two dozen furs on the map, all centered around the city of Seattle. Cascadia, it seems, has become at least one stronghold of the postfurry world, but Transliminal is hardly the only instance of such, with others showing up elsewhere, such as Boston and the Bay Area, each with their own characteristics. This goes beyond simply "there are a lot of furries in the bay area" and into the realm of "we all identify with this, so let's take the next step and makesomething neat."

It's been a few years since Indi and I have gotten to know each other, and even as ve has shown me more and more about the idea, the aesthetic, and the community that is postfurry, I still find myself learning more about it. Sure the same thing can be said about furry as a whole. I think that part of the reason that postfurry feels more slippery to me, however, is due to the mixture of the intentional nature and the varied viewpoints, the former stemming in a large part from the postmodern aspects and the latter from the necessity of being made up of a community of individuals. As such, this could hardly be an exhaustive guide, but it was still well worth the exploration. The synthetic coyote toys, the glowing neoprene otters, the dolls come to life,

though, which make up the community within the community, continue to drive its ethos, and make it what it is, whatever that may be.

- Slack is a team communication service that works similar to IRC: there are channels, you can talk directly with individuals, and so on. The main difference being that since the conversation history is managed server side (rather than client-side, like with IRC), you can see the conversation from any computer or device. It fits in well with the organizational ethos of postfurry. And that is a very important aspect of the community, worth noting. Postfurries have adopted Slack, Trello, MediaWiki Hastebin, and other means of organizing and displaying organized thoughts with gusto. See Postfurry.org for more information.

****** Occasionally, Transliminal is referred to as a 'commune' by some of its members, and this isn't entirely inaccurate: the original intent behind the project was to construct basically that.

I don't normally do an acknowledgement section for articles, but as so many individuals helped me, one is definitely needed. Endless thanks to the members of the Postfurry Slack community, who provided more insight into what makes them uniquely them than I could ever muster. Indi, of course, and Rax, Peach, Buni, Krinn, emanate, Djynn, and Trouffee, through their discussion, have helped me understand this thing I now find myself a part of.

Chapter 16

On Irony

September 7, 2016

Sixteen years ago, I was a not-so-wee lad just starting his freshman year of high school. I had grown a foot and a half in the previous few years, and my voice had fallen down the staircase from alto to baritone. I had just come out to my mom as gay. My favorite saying, which my step-mother hated, was “sarcasm makes the world go ’round”.

And I had just found furry. That too.

Now, today, I’m well on my way to becoming a giant woman working in open-source software. I’ve not grown any taller, really, though my hair is now quite a bit longer, and I no longer sing, not having an outlet I feel safe in. I recently came out to my mom as polyamorous, married to my cis male husband, loving my genderqueer partner, and looking forward to seeing my trans-girl pup again. I’m still in furry; but I no longer believe that sarcasm makes the world go ’round.

A lot has changed in the last sixteen years of being a furry. The tenor of the fandom has changed as the resources have shifted. MUCKs grew less popular, as did IRC, while things such as Twitter, Slack, and social sites have taken off. VCL still exists, as does Yerfl, in some form or another, but FA grew to take their place, and still others are vying for market share. Skype grew, then started to fade, to be replaced by Discord, while AIM and other direct messengers seem to have been overtaken by Telegram and the ilk.

I finished high school in that time, then started university in biochem, switched to music education, switched again to music composition, left university and started working for a health insurance company, and finally wound up at Canonical.

I dated, I stopped dating, I changed species once (from red fox to arctic fox), I composed and wrote. All of this, or at least most of it, took place within furry. At some point, perhaps around 2010, I managed to get in touch with Klisoura, so that I could snag some of his data from the Furry Survey for visualization practice. These visualizations would lead to [a][s] itself and the [a][s] panels, before long, and [a][s] would lead to Love - Sex - Fur and the guides to safer-sex, relationships, and gender.

I like to think that I've grown more sincere over the years, that I've started to prize earnestness above sardonic humor and honesty above glibness. This started as something that I found myself enjoying more and more in others. Not that I didn't enjoy the occasional bit of snark, and I certainly enjoyed good humor, but I found myself starting to surround myself with people who were able to express the way they felt about something truly, without as much of a mask as I had built up for myself.

The journey to becoming a more earnest person, myself, has been one of the harder things I've had to go through in life. The habits formed when young are hard to break, and just as I still misgender or deadname myself, I still find myself slipping back into those sarcastic ways far too easily. It's a mask I wear - one of many - and it adheres too readily to my face. For so long, it was inconceivable that I feel emotions other than anger and pride. Not forbidden, not even ill-advised, but, for me to have felt despair or elation, joy, depression, or sadness...well, that would have been a sign of just how broken I was.

As I put it to my therapist, I took a passage from the book *Dune* by Frank Herbert and applied it way too literally to my life. Young Paul Atreides is being tested by the Bene Gesserit reverend mother with the gom jabbar, a test which will determine whether he is a human or an animal. A human, the reverend mother explains, is in total control of his emotions and feelings, and can use those to better himself, while an animal is ruled by his emotions and feelings, and can easily be overrun. "You've heard of animals chewing off a leg to escape a trap? There's an animal kind of trick," she explains. "A human would remain in the trap, endure the pain, feigning death that he might kill the trapper and remove a threat to his kind."

I was putting myself to this gom jabbar daily, continually. I still do, if I'm not careful. If I'm to be a human, I mustn't let my emotions rule me. I took it far beyond the point where it was healthy, bottling up feelings to the point where they would on escape at moments of crisis. Running away, a suicide attempt, punching a hole in the wall, a fight, a cut, a burn. I would be less than human to feel any emotions but pride in my accom-

plishments or anger at the shortcomings of others. I would be an animal (and not in the fun way). I was trying to be my view of my father, I was trying to be a support for my mother.

My therapist (perhaps rightly) rolled his eyes, but the meaning got across well enough.

I'm still friends with Klisoura, of course, and had the chance of spending a lovely hour or two yapping with him at Rocky Mountain Fur Con a few weeks ago. As we discussed some trends showing up here and there within the fandom, he said something that knocked me on my tail for a bit with its weight: "My journey through furry has been a journey of decreasing irony."

Mine has, as well. Of course, like everything I write for [a][s]. I must caution that this doesn't necessarily apply only to furry: my journey towards living happily has also been a journey of earnestly accepting my emotions and feelings and then expressing them, in not feeling bad about liking the things that I like.

That said, I think it's not worth discounting the ways in which furry is structured to encourage such a shift, from ironic to sincere. The shift may be one that happens in everyone's life, but furry provides the social lubrication to allow it to happen more easily.

The primary means by which furry encourages sincerity is by the obvious fact that we're all really here because we like something. There are plenty of hot takes about hipsters, geeks, sports nerds, and so on, about how uncool it is to be a part of such a group, as though one ought to be sheepish about the things that one enjoys.

I told my story earlier to show just how this is played out. In the competitive nature in which children, especially those

in the formative years of the early teens, are so often raised, it's not enough to like something, one has to excel at it. That is, one can't form a portion of one's identity around something lest that leave a spot for weakness. To enjoy the idea of philately or model trains is fine, but there's risk to be found in enjoying them too much, basing a portion of your identity off of them. There's no pride to be had, and it's opens you up too easily to damage and loss, should your stamp be unattainable or your train set ridiculed. Or, to recast in furry terms, forming a portion of your identity around your membership within the fandom opens you to shame as you watch your fandom being derided as a bunch of sad kinksters by an inebriated volleyball parent in the FC convention elevators.

Liking things - just earnestly liking them, without shame or defensiveness - is something of a skill learned over time. By the time that we are able to form a portion of our identity around something that we like, we've already learned the skill of shame. It has already become engrained in us as we start to actively pursue hobbies in our early to mid teens. To take that enjoyment beyond a simple hobby and into an identity, from a fan to a member, means stepping past that shame knowing full well that it's watching your every move.

Contrary as it may seem, through our habit of connecting with each other through created personae and avatars, we are able to construct something of a defense for ourselves. It's a sort of layer of indirection, which allows, e.g, Makyo to be a member of the subculture while, to her coworkers, Madison is more of a fan of anthropomorphics. The internet has proven a boon for subculture membership in this half-anonymized way; the

same may as well be said of a gamer with a penchant for playing games as fast as possible with only one hand, or an entire sub-culture surrounding countless anonymous individuals playing Pokémon.

Mainstream culture doesn't know how to interface with furry culture because furries are the only non ironic people left on the Internet

— gay victim soul (@tragicgay) August 24, 2016

It's not so much that furry makes one sincere, as it provides so many opportunities to be sincere. Furry didn't make me less ironic, that would be a silly statement for a fandom centered around creating personalized anthropomorphic characters. Furry did, however, make me want to be less ironic. It did help me in getting closer to being a more sincere person.

I think that I'm not alone in this, either. I felt it. Klisoura echoed the sentiment when he said that furry was a journey of becoming less ironic. Twitter user tragicgay felt it when they tweeted about mainstream culture being unable to fully understand furries due to the lack of irony.

@tragicgay I wonder if, despite some ppl saying irony died after 9/11, irony has completely triumphed.

— BilderstreitKünstler (@Christaphorac) August 25, 2016

Is that true, then? That mainstream culture has so enshrined irony that it's baffling to be earnest? Is that us furries failing their gom jabbar?

I'm not sure, and perhaps am not one to say, given how much trouble I've had in my own new sincerity, but I think that may be it, at least to some extent. There's no small part of me that wants it to be the case, too; that wants furry to be this stag-

geringly beautiful new way of looking at the world, experiencing enjoyment, showing emotions, just plain unabashedly liking things.

I think that is, perhaps most ironically, what makes us most human.

Chapter 17

Makyo's Kaddish

March 21, 2012

I had originally intended to write a different article this week, but due to recent events, I'm going to put that on hold. Since I had already started writing it and had limited time to come up with an alternative post, I decided to do something a little more personal. I hope you all don't mind a bit of a fluff post this week. Apologies for the wandering train of thought, I had to hurry to get it up in time!

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

than teaching children effectively. After that, I switched to music composition.

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

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

The piece opens with an introduction from the narrator describing God as "lonely, disappointed father" and "angry, wrinkled old majesty". The tone is immediately set, and not simply by the words. The first sounds the listener hears are actually the entire choir humming an indeterminate pitch *sotto voce*. The effect is close to a science fiction movie's depiction of space, but gives the impression of a vast and frightening expanse. As the piece progresses and the choir starts to sing the words of

the Kaddish, chaos breaks out with loud percussion and bright brass. This isn't a happy song singing the virtues of the Lord.

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

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

I know I need to tie this back to my own experiences with furry, but it requires a bit of explanation first. First, I have to admit that if I'm unschooled in the ways of sociology and anthropology, I'm even more ignorant in theology and apologetics. From the little I've read, though I've come to understand that the relationship between the both Christians and Jews and God

is not a static thing, beyond the base definition of Creator and Created. The relationship changed when Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac; it changed after the biblical flood with the aforementioned covenant; it changed with Moses, with David, and with Jesus. It's still changing.

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

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

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

Around my second or third year of college, after I'd been going to the local meets for a while, I found that, more often than not, I wasn't really happy with the fandom. It's not that I didn't like where it was going, so much that I didn't like that I was in it. I was occasionally ashamed by the fact that I was a fur, and that made me feel sort of sarcastic about the whole thing. Of course, that worked pretty well as a feedback loop, and I started to sort of wind down my life within the fandom. I talked to fewer and fewer people, I went to less and less meets. I still went to cons, but I stopped going to panels. I started making money, but never really used it to buy commissions. I wound up changing my name to distance myself from the past - whereas before I was Ranna, the red fox who stole a cool sounding name from a book, now I was Makyo, the arctic fox whose name meant a demon that distracts from the path to enlightenment (I thought it was witty for a future teacher).

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

Eventually, the snarky attitude calmed down and I settled into a routine with those around me. It took me accidentally embedding myself in a portion of the Colorado furs, a chance invitation to a party, a few more people showing up at the local meets, and moving to an apartment building that hosted other

furs. It was the deeper sense of meaningful communication that I got from my furry friends that seemed to be missing from my music friends that got me thinking that I needed to renegotiate my membership within the fandom. I wasn't content to just be a listless member anymore, I wanted to be an active participant.

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

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

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

goofy automatic textual description generator that would fill in a template a-la the roadtrip game Ad-Libs.

I registered adjectivespecies.com that afternoon.

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

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

Part II

Character Versus Self

Chapter 18

The Default Furry

November 9, 2011

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

With any society come a whole heap of internal stereotypes. With programmers, there are the hierarchical nerds who strive for alpha status, the quiet smart people who do cool things, the loud smart people who also do cool things, the designers, archi-

tects, and engineers. In music, things generally follow the lines of instrument or voice part, but there are some ideas that cross boundaries, such as the dramatic opera singer, the crazy instrumentalist, or the lazy genius. One could, perhaps, measure the strength of a subculture by counting the amount of inside jokes contained within it. Furry is far from immune to this, and there are several recurring threads.

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

Default fur so far: a wolf.

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

Default fur so far: a 22 year old wolf.

Geekdom, particularly computer geekdom, has almost always been dominated by males. The reasons for this are many and complex, but it seems to be a nearly universal truth that the technologically literate castes for the last several hundred years have been made up primarily of men. Furry, which is made up in good part by communications taking place on the Internet, can no more escape that than it can escape certain episodes of certain television shows or, if you've been around for a while, certain articles from certain magazines. Gender in furry is a complicated enough issue to warrant several of its own posts, but for now, let's call it decidedly male.

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

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

but that, due to social, evolutionary, and personal prejudices, we're left with a more uneven seeming distribution. Even so...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 19

Character Versus Self

November 23, 2011

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

I had already been all about the good old furry favorites like Disney's Robin Hood, The Rescuers, Mrs.Frisby and the Rats of

NIMH, the Redwall books, and so on. Finding the fur code and what it meant at that time in my life led to a perfect, terrible storm of destruction for any hopes of normalcy I had planned for my life. I latched right onto it and, after spending three dumb days as a dragon, settled on a red fox with two tails as my character and dubbed myself Ranna. This was the subtle point that would take me the better part of ten years to disentangle: character creation.

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

Furries don't necessarily role play outside themselves. Someone who gets so into renaissance festivals that they wind up working there and living the characters on weekends is casting themselves into a totally different time, where the modern conveniences of life are gone and everything is fundamentally different. Furries - and, though I'm speaking from experience here, I know it doesn't apply to everyone - are perfectly content

to act out their day to day, mundane, boring-ass lives as anthropomorphic canines (statistically speaking). As I was growing up through high school, I hung out with a crowd made up of furry gamers, programmers, and computer nerds; not just the players, but the characters as well. As I grew and moved to college, I decamped from FluffMUCK and moved over to FurryMUCK to spend most of my time in The Purple Nurple, an online, text only gay bar where predominately gay furry yuppies aired their college and post-college woes. We weren't just pretending to be cat- and dog-people, and we weren't just chatting about work, we were cat- and dog-people chatting about work.

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

All of this adds up to something that I feel is fairly unique to the fandom. It is a strange line that divides character from self, in a fur. The line is semipermeable as some would gladly view

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

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

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

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

scenario. My senior recital turned out to be one of the most disappointing experiences in my life, largely in part due to the fact that I had failed to properly execute the commission that was expected of me.

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

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

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

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

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

a single character that was more all-encompassing and close to my self.

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

Chapter 20

Character Versus Self 2

December 7, 2011

I pulled together a few additional ideas on the concept of character versus self visited in a previous post. A lot of these rely on little ideas dropped here and there by comments either on the blog itself or on Twitter. They're all kind of neat, but none of them really warrant a full post. I pulled together these three smaller ramblings here into one larger post in the hopes that I can still get my thoughts out there on the subjects. Enjoy!

Acting

I was turned on to Erving Goffman by a commenter recently and found out a little about his ideas on the presentation of one's self (mostly through secondary sources, full disclosure). Goffman describes our social interactions as "front stage" and "backstage". Each person in a social group is an actor utilizing their props and their role to present a positive image of themselves to their audience, who are, of course, actors in turn doing much the same. This is the front stage aspect, whereas

the backstage aspect is more the idea of who we really are outside of the social play, where we can “deconstruct our personas”. This impression management is a sort of “artificial, willed credulity” (or, more glibly, consensual hallucination, a phrase used by William Gibson, who used it when he coined the term “cyberspace”).

In a lot of ways this concept fits in well with furies. Of course, there is the surface aspect that our frontstage aspects are much stronger in that they differ greatly from our backstage personas - I don't have any specifics on the numbers, but I'm pretty sure that very few of us are anthropomorphic canids sitting in front of a computer. Beyond that, however, the idea still holds: speaking from personal experience, we interact with other furies very differently than how we interact with others, and that persona that we present to our cohorts is a strong one, often considered freer and more true to ourselves than our other roles, but still something different from our true selves due to the whole thing being only a portion of our personalities. It's not the whole of our self that we present to our furry companions.

Whether or not the concept is strictly applicable is up for debate in my mind, however. In terms of the first impressions mentioned earlier, there seems to be this additional layer of role-playing, as if our front stage personas were acting about being actors in a play, and the line is blurred further when bits of information about ourselves, as well as aspects of our other personas, are injected into our avatars via these other layers of our channel of communication. I suppose that it's for this reason that the Internet would be considered largely a backstage

environment, or at least has the potential to be such. The reality, though, is that we construct our characters just as thoroughly online as we do in real life, if not more so, with it being a conscious effort. They are our avatars, yes, but they are also constructed personas used for interacting with our environment in the context of a social structure. Goffman's idea of stage and backstage is more useful in considering that, as we interact with each other within our subculture, we're presenting ourselves in a certain way, acting a part for our audience, yet also giving them a glimpse into our backstage lives due not only to our interactions spanning the online and offline arenas, but also due to the fact that our constructed personas are blatantly not ourselves.

Attention

The Internet hasn't been all roses and sunshine. Since its inception and rapid growth, several problems or perceived problems have been associated, fairly or unfairly, with the liberal interconnecting of people by technology. As the web increased in importance, so these problems increased in visibility. One of the more interesting of these problems is the interestingly named Münchausen by Internet. This is when someone will feign a severe illness or disability for themselves on the Internet in order to garner attention for themselves. It's not quite hypochondria, which is a separate disorder, and it differs from regular Münchausen syndrome in my mind in that, while there's some discussion as to whether the latter is a conscious drawing of attention to one's self, the former requires much more forethought in order to keep up - it is either a gross exaggeration of reality or an outright lie.

Along the same time as the Internet was coming into its own as a serious technological innovation, my own generation was reaching middle- and high-school age, and the age of the over-diagnosed psychological disorder was gaining steam. Friend after friend of mine was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, manic depression, bipolar syndrome, or some other item from the mild side of the DSM-IV (I'm speaking glibly, of course). I knew of a score of classmates on Prozac, as many on Ritalin, and a few on more extreme drugs such as Lithium.

I went through my own period of depression and restlessness, but my solution was to hide it from my parents and escape the best way I knew how: get online. I know I wasn't the only one, too. When I was first getting into the Internet, I associated with many of the same age as myself on a previously mentioned forum, and when I got into furry, I wound up on FluffMUCK, again in the company of several other high-school kids around the same age as myself. I battled my depression with electronic affection and fought my restlessness with... or, well, I enabled any ADD tendencies I had with either wasting time online or thinking about wasting time online. A rough childhood, I assure you, growing up in upper-middle class Colorado with two engineers for parents.

By the time I got to college, however, these three things - the ability to garner attention through lying or embellishing illness online, the over-diagnosis of youth, and the dipping mean age of the furry fandom - had coalesced into the strange amalgam that is The Furry Disorder. The Furry Disorder seems to shift as time goes on - originally, it was bipolar syndrome or manic

depression, then it shifted to ADD, and now it seems to be Aspergers syndrome - but the distinguishing aspects seem to be that it is often a loosely diagnosed disorder among furs in their teens and twenties and is easily used to gain attention online. It's as if a segment of the fandom agreed that the best way to gain reinforcing attention from others was to latch onto this one disorder and capitalize on it as much as possible. Synchronized Münchausen by Internet.

It should be noted, however, that all this pales in comparison to how amusing the term 'cybermunch' is, in referring to someone partaking in or suffering from Münchausen by Internet.

Self-Importance

I've mentioned the Dunning-Kruger Effect before. Briefly, it's the idea that those who are less competent are more likely to overrate their competence, while the opposite is true for those who are more competent - they are more likely to underrate themselves. And boy howdy, am I prime example of this.

It seems as though every fur goes through some creative phases, due in part to how much the fandom itself is centered around creativity. Which phase is most popular seems to change with time. When I first really got into it way back in high school, everyone was drawing - to be a furry, you had to draw (while that's still popular now, it seems that the thing to do now is make your own fursuit, and a few years ago, it was making your own website). I was...not good. I was very bad, actually. It wasn't so much that I lacked a sense of proportion - though I definitely did - or that I had very little sense of light and shadow - though I had none at all - rather that I thought I was pretty awesome. This

was back when Yerf! reigned supreme in the furry art world, and it was a struggle to even get on VCL. I was most definitely convinced that I could get onto Yerf! with ease. I mean, look! I could draw foxes! Foxes and foxes and foxes!

Of course, I was rejected.

When I say I was bad, I'm sure some of that is a bit of the old Dunning-Kruger effect, because, while I was really actually bad, I was getting better. Here's a bit of a progression from what I could find (having destroyed most of what I could find years ago): mid-2000 - late 2000 - 2002. I did draw quite a bit, and with experience, I was learning more and improving. As my skill at creating improved, so did my skill at appraising my own work, and I started to see more and more problems with what I was doing. This is a theme that's been repeated a few times in my life; nothing was more detrimental to my compositional output than my composition degree: the more skill I gained as a composer, the less competent I felt.

An interesting side effect of this is how protective I felt of my work early on as I was working on it, and this is something I've noted in others, not just myself. Every one of my drawings on those early VCL accounts was marked "(c) me", which sounds pretty silly to me now. Silliness aside, though, I know that in the early stages of creative growth, whether in music or art, I was so confident in it that I was eager to copyright everything, whereas once I started to gain more skill, I was more and more willing, even eager to use less restrictive licenses such as Creative Commons licenses. I know I'm not the only one to work this way, too; I've watched several artists within the fandom change similarly over time - the better they got, the more professional

their attitudes, the harsher their critiques of their own work, and the more varied (though, of course, not necessarily more liberal) their attitudes toward the licensing of their creations became. In fact, there seems to be a point in most artist's career in the fandom - lets call it the Pre-Popufur Point - some loosely defined point in time that is penultimate to their going in one of two general directions. As their skill progresses and they get better and better, the chances that they'll approach this point increase, and here they will either become a popular (to whatever extent) furry artist or head the direction I did, feeling less and less comfortable with their work until they stop, or at least slow drastically.

Of course, everyone's different, and not everyone reaches this point at the same time or perhaps even at all. There are plenty who never start drawing because they're preemptively-hard on themselves, and there are those who draw and increase and keep a positive outlook on things. There are those who invert their views on intellectual property, or those that maintain a firm grip on their art throughout their career. And, lest we forget there are those who are so relentlessly polarized in their opinions as to warrant the creation of the LiveJournal community Artists Beware. Even so, the general trend of the Dunning-Kruger effect is deeply ingrained in the fandom's art culture, and, with our unique focus on the visual representations of our characters, seemingly more visible than in society at large.

Chapter 21

Meaning Within a Subculture

April 13, 2012

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

When I write posts for [a][s], I do so in what's called the "watercolor strategy", as named by Daniel Chandler in *The Act of Writing*. That is, for the most part, I start at the beginning, and when I get to the end, I stop. It's a strategy that, to my mind, would work almost solely for the introspective writer, one who

internalizes a subject, then blasts it out on to paper (or screen). The idea is that one works as one does with watercolor, where there is no real way to correct a mistake or change what one has done - one must simply start at the beginning and continue until one feels that the work is done, then stop. There is no editing along the way, as there would be in the “oil painting strategy”; with oils, one has the ability to paint over the paint already in place without worrying about muddying the painting or ruining the paper. As Chandler quotes in the section on the watercolor strategy, “rewrite in process...interferes with flow and rhythm, which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material” (Plimpton, 1989, quoted in Chandler)[1].

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

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

One of the big things that keeps me coming back to these subjects is the standard artist’s complaint that I’m never really satisfied with the product. I can barely even call myself an artist, here - so much of what I’ve done with [a][s] is rehashing ideas

I've heard of or learned about in a non-furry context within the context of furry, and this piece here is no exception. Rather, I'm one with artistic habits.

I was unhappy with both of my posts on "participation mystique". It's such a wonderful concept and fits so perfectly with the contiguous fandom that I couldn't get it out of my head. All the same, I couldn't seem to get down exactly what I wanted to with it. The first post turned into an idea of how members identify with the fandom, which is close to, but not exactly participation mystique. The second post veered off course and into (still related) waters of the definition of our subculture.

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

A Linguistic Introduction

I'd like to begin here with a basic introduction on some of the linguistics that are involved in exploring meaning in the fandom. There's a very important reason for this which I'll go

into more depth on later, but for now, it will suffice to say that language is important to us because our fandom is wrapped up in it. We describe our characters, we write stories about furies, and, above all, we communicate; we are a social fandom. Language is always important to subcultures such as ours which subsist on social interaction.

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

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

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

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

Much of this focus on our means of communication ties into the Internet and the prominence of its role within the fandom. There's really no doubting that a good portion of the fandom "grew up" on the net. The ways in which it facilitates communication between individuals or groups regardless of geographic location fits in so well with a fandom that bases so much of its existence around social interaction. There are a few terms that become important due to this fact, namely "text", "corpus", "medium", and "modality". A "text" is a unit of communication, whether it's a journal post, an image and all of its associated discussion, such as comments, or a webpage like this. A "corpus" is a collection of related texts - this post would be a text, but [adjective][species] would be a corpus - though it can be taken in broader terms, such as the collection of all different texts on FurAffinity - images, journals, comments, user pages - or simply the collection of all texts within our subculture: the furry corpus, if you will.

"Medium" and "modality" are similarly intertwined. The "medium" is, obviously enough, the way in which a text reaches us, and the "modality" is what the text is constructed of. For instance, words and language would be the modality, whereas that can be divided into written words read off a screen on a webpage, or spoken words shared among a group of friends at a convention. The reason I'm bringing up these terms is that, taken together, they form our social interaction within the fandom, and the reason that it's /important/ is because, in particular, our choices of media and corpi are language in and of themselves: that is, that we rely on the Internet for so much of our communication, whether out of necessity or desire, and al-

low the idiolects that we've formed on the 'net to creep into our verbal communications with each other is something of a statement in and of itself.

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

It's an easy thing to say that communication is the basis of our subculture, but more difficult to express it in terms of the source and result of a sociolect comprised of the colliding idiolects of its members. While that is far from the only thing that furry has going for it, it's a definite signifier of our being a society in our own right, and one of the easiest to perceive, once

one takes a step back. We have settled our concentration certain media for a variety of reasons - the ease of constructing an avatar on the Internet, the mediated sharing of texts through different websites and services, and the 'net's way of connecting individuals across distance. Our choice of media is a form of communication in a way, though not simply due to the benefits to be gained from it. There is more, though, to be sure.

Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 1
Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 2
Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 3

Read the whole article at once.

I'm trying something new by splitting this post up, even though it's one coherent article. The next parts will be coming over the next two days. Comments will be disabled until the entire post is published. Thanks for your patience!

Miss the first part? Check that out [here](#)!

On Semiotics

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

That idea really grated on me for a few reasons. First of all, I was in a Madrigal choir at the time, and while the Madrigal

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

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

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

the emphasis is on the potential for thinking to be 'influenced' rather than unavoidably 'determined' by language;

it is a two-way process, so that 'the kind of language we use' is also influenced by 'the way we see the world'

any influence is ascribed not to 'Language' as such or to one language as compared with another, but to the use within a language of one variety rather than another (typically a sociolect - the language used primarily by members of a particular social group)

emphasis is given to the social context of language use rather than to purely linguistic considerations, such as the social pressure in particular contexts to use language in one way rather than another.[1]

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

Beyond that, however, semiotics also takes into account such things as the medium and modality of communication, regardless of whether it has to do with words. Semiotics is just as comfortable looking at body language and posture, meaning conveyed through the layout of a webpage, or even additional meanings conveyed through art, which most definitely

has something to with our own subculture. That is, rather than focusing on language itself, semiotics focuses on the meanings conveyed between actors within a community. It is not that linguistics has nothing to do with meaning, nor that it doesn't take the social context into account, simply that that focusing specifically on those areas is the realm of semiotics, instead.

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

This all goes to show that semiotics goes beyond the individual. The webcomic xkcd recently performed quite a feat[3] by displaying a different comic to different viewers. The comic that was chosen depended not only on the viewer's choice of browser, but also on their location and even the size of their

browser window. The title of the comic was “Umwelt”, which is the collection of sign-relations (briefly, the pair of sign-meaning, or the triad of sign-interpretant-meaning) that make up one’s perception of the world. We cannot help to do anything outside our umwelt, other than to assimilate new meanings into it through semiosis.

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

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

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

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

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

Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 1 Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 2 Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 3

Read the whole article at once.

I'm trying something new by splitting this post up, even though it's one coherent article. The next parts will be coming over the next two days. Comments will be disabled until the entire post is published. Thanks for your patience!

Miss the first part? Check that out [here](#)!

Tying it all together

At some point, the furry fandom started to coalesce. Some would put it in the 1980s - a reader and friend posits that the fandom really got started September 1st, 1980 at Noreascon with Steve Gallacci[5] - some would put it much, much earlier, and

some perhaps later, into the '90s when the Internet became truly accessible. For the sake of this article and much of this site in general, we'd probably go with some time in the mid to late '80s for the source of the fandom. This was the time when the *umwelten*, the spheres of meaning for individuals, began to collide in enough numbers to form that critical mass that led to the formation of a subculture rather than a collection of enthusiasts. Furies doubtless existed before, as is certainly evident even within our own readership, but the furry fandom as a culture phenomenon, the basis of study for much of this site (rather than individual furies themselves), relied upon this interest being actively shared among its members.

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

In short, I tend to focus on what I'm calling the "contiguous fandom". That is, a fandom made of members which share the borders of their *umwelten*, the meanings attached to the sign that is 'furry', in order to create a coherent whole of a fan-

dom. This is the importance of membership; it is the act of being actors in a community that helps to define the community as an entity.

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

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

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

the one to whom “I” and “you” hold meaning as opposed to one and the other, and, although it’s abstract, it becomes very important when it comes to membership.

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

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

There are a few problems surrounding this concept of furry as a semiotic niche, and they have to do with the depth at which one analyzes the fandom, or the distance from it one stands. If,

for example, one were to step back from furry a little ways, one can look at it a different way and see it in the context of a related field: genre theory.

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

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

pin down. This is quite the problem when studying the fandom from within.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And beyond even the concept of extending one's character into a costume one can don, there is our social interaction that happens on a more mundane basis, yet still within the boundaries of "furry interaction". There is an acceptable behavior, however ill-defined, that goes along with being a furry. It's difficult to speak of beyond tendencies and social cues, as many such social customs that come with membership in a subculture

or fandom. It has been noted before, though, that one can tell the furies at a furry convention and a furmeet apart from the non-furs. There's a way that we act, which likely has much more to do with the idea of shared membership and social status than an interest in animals. JM, for instance, writes about the prevalence of geekiness and the behavioral norms that go along with it as they pertain to our fandom[8].

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

Furry is a heady mix of a full slice of human society that somehow seems to remain topical. We have the glue of our mutual interest in anthropomorphics, but beyond that, we have spread our corpus across several different texts in our own personal ways of generating meaning within the context of our subculture. By the interaction of our own spheres of meaning we have generated our own semiotic niche, however fuzzy around the edges, and come up with this idea of "furry". There's no real easy way to pull it apart, even given as broad a topic as semiotics, but by investigating and participating, we always seem to expand it all the further.

Conclusion

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

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

This article and any like it will have it’s necessary downsides. We didn’t really get anywhere, all told - we defined some terms in order to help us understand the ways in which we interact with our subculture, both through the linguistic concept of a sociolect, a language used among our co-fans, and the semi-

otic concept of a niche, a set of meanings and sign relations shared by the members of the niche. It's hard to get anywhere with either, though, especially in such a loose-weaved community. Semiotics and linguistics are all about statements of subtle facts made out in the open. There are concrete tests and analyses to be done (if one could port the commutation test to our visual art in order to find the "graphemes" of muzzles and tails, that could lead to interesting results), but they're difficult to really do well, and even if they were, it's not guaranteed that they would lead to any results, nor if any of the results would even be welcome.

There are positives to be had as well, though. I hope that the article has provided more insight into the the linguistics and semiotics of the fandom. The ideas of sociolects and genres are a good way to think about this broad base of which we are a part, because they provide a foundation of words on which we can base our own explanations of what it means to be a furry. And, beyond the definitions, it's nice to maintain a certain sort of disputability. It allows for a greater membership through greater self identification - more people can become furry because the definition of what furry is can accomodate them. And hey, that sense of mystery about the fandom is always nice, as well. It's a hook for bringing in new members, and for keeping the old ones interested, too.

I know this has been a little out of the norm, but I wanted to actually take my time to research an article and provide a more coherent look at the reasons for studying the fandom, and for this site in general. These things are important to us, too. The meanings we create determine our interactions within the fan-

dom and how they take place. Beyond that, though, by participating in our community as members, we contribute to it. This is how we grow, explore, and find meaning,

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

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Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 1 Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 2 Meaning Within a Subculture - Part 3

Read the whole article at once.

Chapter 22

Dimensions of Character

May 30, 2012

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

It wasn't a really easy thing for me to accept about myself at the time, as I suppose it rarely is for a kid in the southwest States. Colorado is a unique state in that, while much of its area is of a more conservative, Christian character and not generally accepting of homosexuality, there is a stretch that goes from about Fort Collins on down south of Denver along the front range that tends to be more socially liberal and less religiously oriented overall, and certainly more open to differences in sexual orientation than the surrounding areas. I spent a lot of time

growing up in that front-range area where most of those around me likely would've been okay if I had come out, and some of them would have probably rushed to tell me just how okay it is to be gay: Boulder, as a town, is almost intrusively cool with it. Even so, there was this sensation that if I were to leave the Denver-Boulder area, I would be immediately be set upon by both protesters and perpetrators of hate crimes both.

What can I say, I was a dramatic kid.

That's why I started reading about it more and more. I started to look into my preconception that there was this line drawn around my home cities in fat sharpie on the map, with the insides colored pink, and the outsides a horrible, soul-sucking blackness. That sense didn't jive with what I started to experience at school, middle school being a particularly difficult portion of life to deal with. There were kids in school would would, it seemed, readily beat me up for being gay, and there were people whom I met from outside of Boulder that seemed perfectly reasonable and nice about the whole thing. Of course, the whole concept didn't stand up to the slightest bit of scrutiny as soon as I started to look outside of my personal experience.

My big breaking point, however, came when I found the Kinsey scale, which divides sexual orientation into seven degrees, from 0 - Completely Heterosexual to 6 - Completely Homosexual. Before then, bisexuals were something of a myth to me, and much of that was due to the way I originally came out when I frequented forums as a kid. One started bi as a way to test the waters, see if everything was alright, and then one jumped in with a big "ha ha oh just kidding I was gay the whole time". Anyone who stayed bisexual, I was told, just wanted to have sex

with guys, whether they were male or female. Such was life in the middle of America as a pre-teen, I guess.

Once I had found the Kinsey scale, though, things changed drastically. It wasn't just that the scale had been named after and promoted by a man with a 'Dr.' in front of his name, though that certainly helped, and it wasn't just that the scale was built so that there was a number in the center without having the maximum value be an odd number (as a child, I had an irrational hatred of odd numbers). Rather, it was that there was such a thing as a non-binary aspect to this portion of my existence. I had been, until then, convinced through the doxa I was immersed in and my own lucubration that there really were only two choices in life: male and female, gay and straight, hamburger and cheeseburger.

After that, my interest only grew. I can't honestly say that I jumped directly into the study of non-binary modes expression and identification, but as I continued on to high school and even beyond, into college, I kept finding things that were not as simple as I had previously imagined them to be. I suppose everyone goes through such a period in their life, but for me, it always seemed to come back to that original "discovery" that much of which we assume to be binary through the workings of social doxa or our own incomplete comprehension of the matter is, in fact, a gradient, a cline, a continuum.

The next big stepping stone for me, in terms of comprehension, came after I started to read up more and more about gender disparity and transgender issues, for even though I dated a wonderful trans guy in high school, I still had little to go on in terms of really trying to understand those issues. I understood

the whole concept of gender identity versus biological sex, and I even had some inkling to there being some sense of non-duality through my scant interactions (at that point), with intersex and hermaphroditic individuals; however, some portion of my mind kept catching on the snag that there really were only two sexes and two gender identities, and that transgender folk simply had a mismatch somewhere in there.

The actual moment came when I found a funny looking poster of a stick figure (which I wasn't able to find, exactly, but here is the closest I came up with) which described not only biological sex and gender identity as gradients, but also gender expression, along with the familiar sexual orientation. "Whoa," I thought, "Here I was going about this all wrong, and in much the same way as before!". It wasn't so much that I had rediscovered gradients in life, as that I really started to comprehend the multidimensional nature of what is often taken for granted, if not declared outright to be the norm. Gender, when I was growing up, meant boy and girl, penis and vagina, the simplest explanation. When I started to get older, I started to understand that there was such a thing as gender separate from biological sex, but only in a psychopathological context, when they did not match up and it caused identity issues. It took a goofy stick figure poster to knock me into the sense that there were multifarious dimensions to what had previously been a relatively simple concept for me to understand, insofar as I was capable of doing so. I was A. Square finally comprehending that there was a third, possibly even a fourth dimension.

In both of these instances - discovering gradients and discovering new dimension in definition - I found myself applying

these new-found ways of looking at things to the world around me. I was lucky, though, in that the world around me took place largely online in the form of interacting with animal people. The benefits of interacting online so much are myriad, but the two most pertinent ones are that I was a) able to do research quickly and easily and b) able to investigate the “paper trail” that I and so many others had left behind. In short, my almost subconscious reaction to learning these new things was to immediately try to apply them to furry.

Like all such slippery concepts, I wound up going down quite a few blind alleys, barking up a quite a few empty trees, and several other appropriate metaphors too numerous to list here. I tried to apply these concepts either too liberally, or not liberally enough, to the world around me and found some ways in which they were more helpful than not in explaining the ways in which I and others interacted with the fandom and with our own understandings of or identifications with anthropomorphics.

In fact, in the last paragraph, I touch on at least two very important gradients and dimensions of character that have come up time and time again: anthropomorphics and, for many, identification with a subculture built off this interest in anthropomorphic art, role playing, and character creation. Within those, as within all aspects of membership and identity, are at least three different dimensions making up one’s association: interest, participation, and creation. Interest, of course, is how much one is interested in such a thing, how much they read up on it, how much they take in. Participation, on the other hand, is how much that person actively integrates themselves into the thing they are interested in: creating an account on FA, browsing art,

favoriting images, watching artists, leaving comments. Finally, there's the aspect of creation. Beyond simple participation, this is the means by which someone can contribute, give back, post to FA, and gain the participation of others in turn. All of these may be thought of as gradients, where the levels with which one may show interest, participate, and offer up unique creations.

These are, of course, just simple examples of the varying dimensions and gradients with which one can interact with the fandom, of course, and there are just as many, if not more ways to identify with anthropomorphic animals outside of just the furry fandom. As I was writing all this, I started to think that, in at least one way, it all sounded familiar. It took me a moment to place where, but the further back I looked in my past, the closer it seemed to get until finally, I remembered. FurCodes.

With how much time I spent thinking about those things, it's remarkable that I was unable to really internalize the whole concept of gradients and dimensions in so many aspects of my life (no one ever accused me of having an over-abundance of intelligence). These simple, one-line codes of letters and symbols are an accurate summary of much of what I was talking about just a few paragraphs up. For every thing in our life that we take to be black or white, true or false, totally binary, there is a good chance that it is not nearly so simple, but embodies a full spectrum of hues, saturations, and values. I plowed through the process of creating a code again and came up with the following, answering relatively truthfully:

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FCA3amr A- C++ D+ H+ M++ P R T W+ Z Sm+ RLCT a cl+++ dl e++  
f+ h+++ iwf+++ j+ p+ sm+
```


None of this should really be of any surprise, of course, but a few things caught my eye and offer a good example to prove my final point. It feels as though it has been a really long time since Zines and Doom have felt pertinent, and the division of age into entire decades seems almost quaint these days. Age, it seems, has not exactly treated the FurCode very well. That is the final, most important of gradients or dimensions out there to take into account: time. All of the things I have mentioned so far in this post - sexuality, gender, association with the fandom and anthropomorphics - and really most everything out there has this aspect of time tied to it that is so rarely thought about. All of the things that we hold to be solid and true in life are tied to time in one way or another (some of which seem a little surprising).

I was dead-set, utterly convinced that I was straight, then that I was gay, and for a period after that, that I was bi. I was totally comfortable in my gender in terms of how it matched up with my biological sex, and then I was thrown into a whirlwind of confusion. I was definitely sure that I would always have a 'Zine or two pertaining to the fandom, that I would always be a wizard on a MUCK, that I would always be FCFp3dwa.

Clearly, this isn't the case. Time is a tricky thing, and yet, if I take a step back and take a look at the trajectory of my membership to the fandom and my association with anthropomorphics, I have no trouble in understanding or even appreciating that time is just another dimension of character, whether literally in the sense that my character is constituted of various different aspects of myself at a particular time, or more metaphorically, that time is a part of defining my sense of character.

There are so many different dimensions and gradients in character, and within association to the fandom and to one's personal character or characters. I've listed a few, such as species and time, or the means of interaction that we have with the fandom, whether it's interest, participation, or creation. What other aspects are there? Are any of these particularly pertinent in your own situation? I'd like to see some comments with some of your own stories as to what dimensions you've found important in your lives, and what things have surprised you by being a sliding scale instead of a duality.

- For those who are curious, here is my code decoded.

Chapter 23

Interpreting an Avatar

January 2, 2013

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 letters from possessives and plurals, or adding it in in other places, dropping pronouns and repeating words. For example, if I were 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 inperceived 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 peo-

ple 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* 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 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.

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

Chapter 24

Fantasy and Frameworks

June 22, 2013

Fantasy, notably sexual fantasy, plays a vital role for us as we grow into sexual people. There's a lot to be said about just how formative fantasies can be, as well. Even though one's first sexual experience no doubt plays a large role in one's life, the fantasies that lead up to that and the way they change afterward (and are refined throughout life, of course) figure prominently in making us who we are.

However, fantasies do not occur in a vacuum. After all, they certainly wouldn't change all that much after a sexual encounter of any importance; the first being a notable example, but any particularly delightful (or particularly awful) encounter can change the way we fantasize. So it really isn't any surprise, if our fantasies don't exist in a vacuum, that if we structure our life around a certain set of ideas, a certain framework, that our fantasies will have something of that structure as well, and there's really no better example of such a framework for a website de-

voted to talking about love and sex in the furry fandom than the furry fandom itself.

The idea of frameworks on which to hang aspects of our lives is hardly unique to fantasies, of course. Much of the mythical aspects of religion serve the same sort of purpose: if we can understand our world from creation up until now through some sort of tale or story, then we have some context, some grid in which to place our thoughts, ideas, and action. That story can be something that's meant almost entirely as an analog, such as a ladder reaching up to heaven, one side of which angels ascend and the other side of which angels descend, or it can be something to be interpreted literally such as the Israelites' travels in Exodus. Both of these offer us something: a lesson, an idea, a concept that people can use to build up a framework of reality.

The example may be a bit abstruse, but in almost all aspects of life, we rely on a framework in which to fit things so that we may more easily understand them. Another way to think of the concept is a grid, or, to follow the metaphor further, a pair of glasses with a grid painted on them. We seek to find the level to which to align that grid, so that the ground lines up with the horizontals and the trees align with the verticals. It's a way of thinking about and interpreting the world around us.

So what is sexual fantasy and how exactly does it rely on a framework of interpretation? It might help to first break down sexual fantasies into a few rough categories, because I think that, by understanding those categories, it will be easier to figure out the way they apply to the topic at hand.

1. **Backward-Thinking Fantasy**- these fantasies are about events that have happened in the past which have come to mean a lot to us. It could be that we experienced some wonderful time, with someone else or by ourselves, and it struck a chord. It need not have even been wonderful, it could've been awful and, instead, the fantasy takes a turn for the "what could I have done different"-ness. Either way, everything relies on something from the past.
2. **Forward-Thinking Fantasy**- fantasies that look forward to some event in the future, whether or not it's definite, are finding a way to project past events into what we suppose will happen to us some time down the line. Again, these can focus on either the positive or the negative; after all, revenge fantasies are hardly uncommon.
3. **What-If Fantasies**- these are the most common - for me, at least - types of fantasies: taking our current situation and either recasting it into something sexualized (what if I were receiving oral sex right now), taking our current situation and replacing it with something else (what if I were receiving oral sex on a picnic somewhere right now), or replacing our current situation with something entirely different (what if I were some anthro fox person chilling in a bar and some random wolf...well, you know).

The first one is obvious in its connection with these sorts of reticles through which we view the world. The things we've done in the past actually took place; they've happened, they've already been interpreted, and we already can look at them

through the lenses that we've constructed out of the frameworks we hold dear.

The second is similarly obvious. They are things we expect, want, or for some other reason need to happen. These are, of course, often not sexual - imagining the relief of graduation or what you'll do with this year's bonus are very potent (if not exactly orgasm-inducing) ways to think about the future. However, most anyone who has taken part in a long-distance relationship with a sexual aspect can assure you that these come fast and hard at times, and can even be a relatively exciting thing to share with one's partner (phone sex or type-fucking is okay, talking about fantasies is pretty neat, but putting them together is a well-tested means of testing such things out in otherwise constrained circumstances).

The third one, though, is where we really should focus, as I hinted at before. Thinking of furry as a framework constructed specifically with fantasy in mind buys us quite a lot. We can take all of these things we think and dream about, sexual and otherwise, and apply this lens of anthropomorphic animals to it. Furry isn't just anthropomorphic animals, it's anthropomorphic animals told consistently and coherently. By that, I mean that these aren't just animal-shaped monstrosities existing without history or future, but these are our characters that live and grow with us, or stories set in worlds with centuries of past behind them taking place over time. The framework is loose enough to accommodate Renaissance-era worlds such as Kyell Gold's *Volleat* at the same time as it accommodates Kevin Frane's future-ish universe of *Summerhill* (you'll have to read the book to see what 'future-ish' means).

In short, what furry buys us is an open invitation to fantasize within its bounds. Part of the reason that sex plays the role that it does within the fandom is the combination of the previous two belabored points: if sexual fantasy plays such a large role for us, and furry is made for fantasy, then the two fit together quite nicely. All of the art, all of the role-play, even the convention sex and fursuit sex all play into that, they're all one sort of way or another of acting out fantasy within this aspect of our lives.

These aren't just simple, one-off fantasies, either: they can serve the very real purpose of exploration of self. In my own case, I don't really know how else I would've felt comfortable exploring my own gender identity without having some aspect of role-play involved.

There are various ways that various trans* have found or have been made to explore this, themselves. The most obvious being the Real-Life Experience or RLE, where a trans* patient is required to live their life in their desired gender role, fulfilling a predetermined checklist of items, sometimes before their doctor will prescribe hormones, and almost always before a surgeon will perform SRS. There are good and valid reasons that this standard of care is advocated, but some criticisms have been levied against it for being a mechanism of gatekeeping.

For myself, the outlet of role-play within the fantasy world was my form of experience, though, of course, hardly RLE. The fact that I had something in my life already set up to accommodate a change in form so drastic as a change in perceived sex - after all, that's relatively minor considering the whole "look, I'm an arctic fox!" thing - gave me a means of exploring in a relatively safe place without necessarily committing to something

such as hormones or surgery. I spent a good deal of time between about 2006 and 2011 exploring the tie-ins between gender and sex as they pertained to me by exploiting this whole framework that I had to work with. I could, in other words, pass, even to the point of having sex (lots of that, actually, I was quite the hornball for awhile, but I digress).

That experience, the fantasy that I had the fortune to be able to live out in at least some sense was really one of the more formative aspects of my life. What started out as a "mere" sexual fantasy wound up being one of those delightful self-discovery type things, helping me to figure out the ways in which I best interact with gender. It wasn't RLE, but it served many of the same purposes for me.

Fantasy serves a very important role to us for reasons such as this. We gain experience interacting with the world in a social manner by finding healthy ways to harness fantasy for our own purposes. It's not that everything I did surrounding all of that was healthy, by any stretch (my grades in school and at least a few friendships and relationships suffered), but neither was it useless faffing about on the Internet. I know I'm not alone in this, either. Furry as a framework for fantasy has helped just about everyone I know within the fandom in one way or another, whether it's helping them through a tough time, such as the way my social circle pulled together after a friend's death, or the sexual release many find.

I should note that I don't think this is necessarily a furry thing, of course. Similar frameworks exist in many different communities, even ones that permit and encourage sexuality. Several kink communities are notable examples of this. This is

a very large part of our lives for many of us, though, and so it's notable on a personal level. I am a very big fan of it, and think it's something worth embracing, as is probably obvious, and I think that a fair number of folks out there feel the same way. There are unhealthy ways to go about such things, of course, but that does not preclude healthy ways, either; after all, the option to have something that's safe, fun, and social is something to cherish.

Chapter 25

On Real Life

July 3, 2013

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 furies 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.

Chapter 26

Boys, Girls and the In-betweens

November 16, 2011

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

I, admittedly, grew into the fandom with a similar mindset, expecting that it would be a warm and welcoming place for a young gay (as I identified at the time; things have since shifted) man, and I certainly wasn't disappointed. There was a very welcoming, bordering on celebratory, attitude towards non-

heterosexual orientations, and there was certainly no shortage of guys around to fit into that niche. I came from a pretty standard family as far as gay kids from upper-middle class liberal America go, and even I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of acceptance and testosterone flowing around within the fandom. It definitely fit in well with my burgeoning sexuality, in that I had a lot of supportive people surrounding me and, to put it bluntly, a lot of choices for the targets of my affection. Even today, I'm surprised at how large a part sexual orientation plays in those that I meet, to an embarrassing point, in some.

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

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

Here now, I've been playing coy, and that's probably not a good thing for writers to do. I know that this is the case because, in eleven years of being around within the fandom now, I've

done my own fair share of playing around with gender and talking with those who do similar online, and I think I definitively state that there are several reasons for doing so. They can be divided into needs and wants: those things that are biological or psychological imperatives and those things that are more desires than must haves.

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

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

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

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

Gender identity is always a sticky issue to get around, as it doesn't have quite the recognition that sexual orientation has, and thus has less support behind it, both from medicine and psychology, as well as society at large. Many don't understand the issues surrounding gender, and it's difficult to comprehend

what exactly is involved when gender and sex don't match up. Despite my own experiences with being in a relationship with a transgender person, I didn't quite understand things until only rather recently.

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

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

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

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

Furry is very much a sexual subculture, when taken as a whole(though not perhaps as much as people think). It's not surprising, then, that gender plays so large a role within the fan-

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

Chapter 27

Eighty-Twenty

February 1, 2012

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

As I did in the previous article, I feel the need to provide the following information and disclaimers about myself. Firstly, I am a biological male, I do not identify as male-gendered, and in terms of sexuality, while I'd call myself pansexual, I am engaged

to another man. Since that's what I've got to work with, that's the viewpoint I'll be writing from, even though I'll try to draw as much as I can from others. In addition, the title is in reference to results provided by Klisoura's Furry Survey, which will be mentioned within the article itself. Some of the thoughts in this article come from the responses to the [adjective][species] survey on gender identity and sexual orientation in the fandom. Finally, I know that my articles are wordy, perhaps more so than they need to be, but given that this topic is especially important to me, I do hope that you'll forgive a slightly longer read.

Now that we've satisfied that nagging part of me that needs to make disclaimers...

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

And it was pretty fulfilling, too! I met some wonderful people I still love to spend time around (hi guys!), had my fair share of relationships that occupied heart and mind almost completely while they lasted, and just generally lived out my little hedonist life as a red, then an arctic fox. I explored some things that I would never do in person, and some things that aren't even possible offline, but in all, it was a young gay man's

paradise; sex without consequences, a large dating pool, and a surrounding subculture that was almost fanatically accepting.

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

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

Age 5-12: "ew, girls are icky!"

Age 13-14: "I'm supposed to like girls now..."

Age 15-25: "ew, girls are icky!"

Age 26-32: Maturity

Age 32+: A mystery. Some say *The Gay* ends, some say that this is about 102 in gay years, and some say that a few mythical couples live on...

Alright, so that was put very glibly. Even so, I bring this up in continuation from last week's article, *Participation Mystique*, wherein I mention some of the participation mystique that gay men have with western, or at least American gay culture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is, of course, only one example of the sex and gender bias within the fandom, of course. Along with our unique brand of heterophobia, there do seem to be some unique gender roles

that we've appropriated for each other here in furry. As with most gender roles, they focus on dichotomies and binary states. Men are x, women are y, and never the twain shall meet. I tried to pull together three good examples, but there are, of course, plenty more than that.

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

With this, as with most gender roles, there is little danger in bucking the trend, but the pressure to go along with it remains. One will not be castigated because one is a female consumer or male creator, but there is still an expectation that things will work a certain way, and perhaps a bit of disappointment when they don't. It is interesting to see the differences in sex between those who are roaming the aisles and those who are working the tables at a convention dealers den, however, especially given the reported demographics of the fandom as a whole.

Female as nonsexual, male as hypersexual A friend on twitter recently mentioned that one of his favorite things about a certain adult website was that it provided some insight into the

feminine state of mind when it came to sex. "Society makes that hard to see," he said. "Since for girls, sex is some big secret for the most part, when guys are concerned." This is a codified gender role that goes way, way back; centuries, even. That a female would ever enjoy sex was something that was simply beyond the ken of many, and to this day, that remains a concern within society.

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

Female as offline, male as online One of the interesting experiences surrounding gender that I had in college had to do with the gender differences between the majors offered by the university. I went to a school that very much bought into a lot of old-school ideas, from the way it treated the arts to the ways it expected students to act. Students and parents bought into this, as well - there was another, more liberal school in the state, and our goal seemed to be "don't be them." So, not only were fe-

male engineers and scientists more rare, but they more readily bought into certain roles such as “nerd” that males didn’t necessarily need to buy into. You could be a “jock” male computer science major, it seemed, but you couldn’t be anything but a “nerd” female computer science major.

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

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

Rather than end this overly long article on a simple concluding statement, thought, I want to take the more proactive approach by putting out a call for submissions. I’ve written this “Eighty-Twenty” article from the standpoint of a mostly-male furry in a mostly-male fandom. What I think we really need, though is the “Twenty-Eighty” article written from a female standpoint about how the fandom works from that point

of view. I know that a few of you (hi guys!) have already approached me about the possibility of writing such an article; well, let this be your call to action - I don't think I'm alone in wanting to hear more sides of the issue!

If you're interested in writing the companion piece to this, you may get in touch with us via email, or send us a note on twitter to @adjspecies; we'd certainly welcome a guest post to help fulfill this need in the community.

Chapter 28

Trends Within Trends

June 25, 2014

Tiny foxes: good for comforting.

It started innocuously enough with a tweet. I don't remember the exact phrasing of it, but I had been having a rough day and was feeling the need for some sort of protective affection that I just couldn't quite find offline; I'm rather tall and so it's hard for me to find a way that's comfortable for all parties involved to get that sensation of being held and protected. I think I wound up tweeting something silly to the effect of "I just want to curl up in a shirt pocket where it's warm, cozy, and hidden." I suppose I've always been a bit of a sap.

Like most things with far-reaching consequences, this start into the exploration of the "micro" side of the furry fandom had a seemingly inconsequential beginning. I've mentioned before that, after changing the ways in which I interacted online, several people treated me as though I were smaller than I really am (helped, no doubt, by the combination of text-only interaction

and the lack of any specified height in my character description). With that trivial sentence, however, it suddenly became explicit, and before long I was interacting with those around me specifically as a tiny anthropomorphic fox.

Tiny foxes: good for making hammocks in your antlers.

This is one of those things that feels incredibly silly to write about in such plain terms. For me, however, it was a new twist on the ways in which I interacted in familiar surroundings. Everyday objects and friends became towering structures to scale, and media such as MUCKs and Twitter became my playground. In short, it felt like a new means of interacting with the furry community as a whole, akin to the way I felt when I first discovered the subculture.

And yet, much was still the same. I was still pretending to be a foxperson on the Internet. My friends-group remained much the same. Nothing else had really changed in my life, except suddenly, I was part of a community within a community: a sub-subculture. It came with a label: micro.

Furry, as a label, is really much too broad to be meaningful except in the most general of scenarios. It's like saying "Americans" when we know that, with a population of almost 320 million people, that there are bound to be, for instance, people who describe themselves as "staunch democrats" or "devout Christians", though, of course, even those labels are far too broad in some cases. "Staunch democrats" does not take into account the actual politics and core beliefs of an individual any more than "devout Christian" takes into account the denomination of Christianity of the devout.

Tiny foxes: good for booping noses.

So it is that we wind up with trends within the larger trend of furry, and trends within those as well. Micro, as a trend, was a new one to me, and thus the sensation of newness that reminded me so much of joining furry in the first place.

I've been a part of various different groups within the larger group of furry before, of course, just as we all are. I'd identified with gay furies, then fell out of that as a means of identification as my sexuality matured. I've identified with trans* and genderqueer furies as well, as my sense of self has grown over the last several years. The list goes on, as I'm sure it does for all of us when we boil our interests down to labels and identities. Why is that, though?

Part of the reason I think that these trends within trends are as big a thing as they are is that a trend, a label, an identity, or even a kink can offer one a sense of community. It's all well and good to be a tiny fox - or genderqueer for that matter - and feel that one has found an identity that makes one feel comfortable. However, it is the sense of community, of belonging to a larger group that adds completeness to that and can help make us feel truly whole.

Also, these interests or identities, when taken up by a group, help to generate interest and identity in others by the force of their own presence. That is, while I really rather liked anthropomorphic animals and playing zoomorphic games while growing up, realizing that there was a community that bases its very existence off such things led me into the fandom. Similarly, while I never felt wholly comfortable with my gender while younger, it was the resources of a community and an identity that helped me suss out my feelings on the matter.

Tiny foxes: not very good for martinis.

In this way, these trends act as attractors in a system: the closer one winds up to them, the more likely one is to wind up a part of them. I think this describes my journey into the furry subculture pretty accurately: by my presence online, as well as my interests in general, I wound up close to the community, and my proximity led to my eventual membership.

Along similar lines, the overlap between these sub-trends within larger groups such as furry can help introduce one - and thus bring one closer to - additional groups that one might not find otherwise. For instance, given my own shared interest in exploring both gender and furry has led me to the various ways in which the two interact, from the communities surrounding gender transformation, mixed-gender characters, the gender gap within the fandom, and so on, all of which I probably would not have found myself a part of were it not for my previous interests and identities.

As I alluded to earlier, this is hardly a furry-only phenomenon. After all, anything from the entirety of the human race down to the individual level can be divided up into separate trends, likes and dislikes, senses of identity, and so on. However, as I have mentioned countless times before, the fact that so much of our interaction takes place online, or is shifted online after the fact (as would be the case with convention reports and photos), we leave a vast paper-trail. All one needs to do is take a peek at someone's profile on any popular art site and see the groups they consider themselves a member of, the ways in which they identify (my profile on Weasyl, for instance, has

links to my open source code repositories, which I think speaks to how exciting of a person I am not).

It's worth taking a moment to step back and investigate the ways in which you interact with others and identifying the trends that tie you together. Those ties and the ways in which they interact are what makes furry so durable a fabric.

Chapter 29

Witnessing and Mirroring

November 26, 2014

I don't often read Reddit - the site and I get along fine, I just can't seem to maintain interest in any subreddit for more than a few weeks - but I do occasionally find a good link or two when I wind up there. Most recently, I was trawling several different subreddits about gender and came across a set of delightful concepts that I think fit in well with the furry fandom.

I talk quite a bit about identity here on [a][s], to the point where I worry that I talk about it a little too much. Time and again, however, the importance of identity is brought home to me, and I can't help but sit back, amazed at the ways in which it changes the ways in which we think about ourselves and interact with the world around us. Time and again, I find myself reminded that I'm a part of the huge, weird, delightful subculture, and there is no small aspect of identity that plays a part in that.

I've gone through something of a sea-change in the last decade or so. Over that period of time, of course, one would be expected to change a great deal, metamorphose into something new and different. However, a sea-change is one of those things that makes the most sense in retrospect. It's in looking back over the past ten years of my life that I can really say, "Goodness, I used to be a completely different person."

It's not a bad thing, really. In a lot of objective ways, it's a good thing that I came to terms with being an adult. I feel a lot healthier now. I've taken steps to set my life in accord with how I wish my life was, and that means doing all sorts of things, from visiting a therapist and psychiatrist regularly, to getting that eye exam I've always known I've needed.

I've also started to come to terms with being a transgender person. This was something that I've known about myself in some form or another for nearly a decade, but not had the courage to do much but hide it, often even from myself. In the last few years, though, I've come out to myself, my husband and partner, my friends, then my work, and within the last few weeks, my immediate family. It means a lot to me to have those closest to me know...well, me. It means one thing to interact with someone on a regular basis, but an entirely different thing to have that interaction be honest and open, something which I hadn't had in the eight or so years leading up to this.

Another change that I've found myself going through is a shift in the company I keep. I have a lot of friends, for which I'm thankful, but I've noticed that, over the last few years, a lot more of the friendships that I've started to form and really begun to cherish have had, at some level, interaction that involves gen-

der. I've been searching for meaningful ways to connect with the world around me and that often involves hunting down people with whom I share a common interest, goal, lifestyle, or identity. It's something I've talked about on here before, even, how furies tend to seek out the company of other furies. In the last two dozen months, I've been working, both consciously and subconsciously, to seek out the company of those going through similar journeys with gender as myself.

Both of these concepts fit in neatly with a paper surrounding the concepts I mentioned at the beginning of this article. The paper, titled "Witnessing and Mirroring: A Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Formation" by Aaron Devore (linked below) centers around the ideas of witnessing and mirroring. These two concepts, witnessing and mirroring, play fundamental roles in the interaction of a furry with the furry fandom, and why help explain why our subculture is a plural, rather than simply a solipsistic phenomenon.

The paper is an interesting one, from a personal standpoint. It goes through a fourteen step process that generalizes much of the transgender process of acceptance and self-actualization. While only some of these stages fit with my interaction with furry, I'll reproduce the entire list here for completeness' sake:

Abiding Anxiety - Unfocused gender and sex discomfort.

Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex - First doubts about suitability of originally assigned gender and sex.

Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex - Seeking and weighing alternative gender identities.

Discovery of Transsexualism - Learning that transsexualism or transgenderism exists.

Identity Confusion About Transsexualism - First doubts about the authenticity of own transsexualism or transgenderism.

Identity Comparisons About Transsexualism - Testing transsexual or transgender identity using transsexual or transgender reference group.

Tolerance of Transsexual Identity - Identify as probably transsexual or transgender.

Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual Identity - Waiting for changed circumstances. Looking for confirmation of transsexual or transgender identity.

Acceptance of Transsexualism Identity - Transsexual or transgender identity established.

Delay Before Transition - Transsexual identity deepens. Final disidentity as original gender and sex. Anticipatory socialization.

Transition - Changing genders and sexes.

Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender and Sex Identities - Post-transition identity established.

Integration - Transsexuality mostly invisible.

Pride - Openly transsexed.

Part of the reason that I wanted to post the entire list is that I really feel that a lot of my own journey through furry follows along similar lines. After seeking out fantasy worlds in which I could be myself, I learned about the furry subculture, then cautiously tested the waters before finally not only adopting the identity of being a furry as my own, but accepted it to the point

of being proud of my membership, leading to articles like these. It's a good feeling, having an identity that feels comfortable and valid, having a way of life that doesn't cause friction on a base, internal level.

This is where witnessing and mirroring come in. My experiences are fairly common among furries - that is, I'm hardly experiencing anything new among members of our subculture. I participate in the simple online role-play that seems part and parcel to our fandom. I've got a personal character. I occasionally get art of myself, sometimes with others. It's a good life that a lot of us have latched onto.

It's this interplay between personal identity and social interaction that makes up some of the most interesting bits of furry life, however. Within Devore's article, the author brings up two concepts which "run through the lives of many people as they search for self-understanding." 'Witnessing' is simply the act of being witnessed embodying an aspect of one's identity by an outside party. 'Mirroring', in the context of this article, is sort of like the complement: it is seeing aspects of one's identity embodied in others around oneself.

Both of these ideas play an important role in the formation and bolstering of identity. Witnesses to our true selves help to reinforce the ways in which validate our identity as furries. This is part of the reason behind fursuiting in public, telling loved ones about furry, and so on. As Devore puts it, "When dispassionate witnesses provide appraisals which conform to one's own sense of self, it leaves one with a feeling of having been accurately seen by others who can be assumed to be impartial." The opposite is also true, however, as is evidenced in the back-

lash seen within our subculture when the media represents furries in a way that is seen as unfair or inaccurate: being witnessed as something that we know we are not is damaging in inverse proportion to how validating being witnessed as we are can be.

Mirroring is perhaps closer to the surface for many furries. It is precisely the act of seeing in others that portion of identity we find within ourselves that lends the greatest validation to our membership. Devore sums it up in a neat hendyatriss: “Each of us needs to know that people who we think are like us also see us as like them. We need to know that we are recognized and accepted by our peers. We need to know that we are not alone.” It is by seeing and interacting with others who we perceive as like us that we find reaffirmation of our identity. We’re not alone, we’re not crazy, we’re just being ourselves together. This is so important to furry that we have elevated the convention experience to something akin to gnosis.

These concepts do not simply apply to furry at the surface level, but at least once removed: furry, I would argue, provides a framework within which it is more comfortable for one to present as the identity close to the core of one’s being than the world at large. That is, by being a space which we would consider safe and welcoming, one is more likely to accept and adopt an identity that might carry with it a social disadvantage outside of the subculture and find both witnesses and mirrors to help bolster the sense of self.

This came up recently as a friend confided in me that it was much easier to count the furries that they knew who were not trans* in some way than to count the furries that were. We’ve talked here before about how the fandom is welcoming to the

underprivileged group of gay and lesbian members, but that is also true of trans* members as well. Even the reporter from Kotaku who visited Further Confusion 2013 noticed this.

I think that part of the reason comes down to something that a reader shared with us back in 2012 that is worth repeating: “Minority identity acts as a force multiplier on social dynamics.” That is, by virtue of having all these mirrors of our identity at the ready, we’re more likely to share the weal and woe that go along with the rest of our lives and knit all the closer together. Perhaps I’m conflating, but it seems that it is more easy to share and invite witnessing with someone who mirrors oneself in another aspect of identity - that is, to come out as gay or trans* or any other aspect of identity to someone who shares this furry identity - and several others have shared similar feelings.

My sea-change over the last ten years or so has been one primarily centered around gender identity. I’ve subconsciously torn down aspects of the identity hammered into me in my youth and built up new ones. I’ve set aside relationships with work and school that were unhealthy and sought new and affirming ones. I’ve changed my name, changed the way I talk, changed the way I dress. It’s the type of thing that is easily summed up into three sentences in spite of the ten years of progress. However, it’s also the type of thing that required the social aspect to be firmly in place. I required the witnessing of my delightful husband and fantastic partner, of my parents and coworkers, just as I needed the mirrors of all of the friends I’ve made in the last few years who share the same path as myself.

And these things hold true for furry as well. I’m indebted to all of the fantastic people I’ve met through the fandom and

through this site for witnessing my own growth as a member of this community and for being such fantastic mirrors, things we all need in life. Thanks, as always, for following along with my own journey. If you're curious about the rest of the paper that was at the core of this article, it is available online for free [here](#).

Chapter 30

Gender: Furry

March 7, 2018

Many people, I suspect, use the idiom, “hindsight is twenty-twenty,” in a way that is better served by other, more appropriate words or phrases. The sense in which I hear it most commonly used is perhaps more adequately covered by the beautiful portmanteau, “regretrospect”. That is, now that things are said and done, I regret a lot of what happened during this adventure.

Also, it’s my second favorite portmanteau after “congratulations” and really ought to see wider use.

No, I think “hindsight is twenty-twenty” is better reserved for cases when seemingly unrelated occurrences come together to form an outcome that seems to be greater than the sum of the parts. It fits best when you look back at your life and see disparate, unconnected events come together to make the situation you find yourself in now.

I came out to myself and my (at the time) fiancé as transgender over a process of several months. It began sometime in

2010 or so, when I started to feel like I was able to put words to the things that were making me feel bad. I began by identifying as genderqueer, and although that label still fits very well, I adopted ‘transgender’ in 2015 as the one that I use in day-to-day life to describe myself, as it leaves the fewest questions as to why I’m a six-foot-two rectangular man-shape in feminine clothing and makeup.

But we’re talking about hindsight, so it’s worth bringing up that one of the only things I ever stole was the book “The Boy Who Thought He Was A Girl”, back in second grade. I’m guessing at the title here, as I can find no record of it through casual Googling, however, I remember that it was a trashy, essentialist book about a boy who wanted to learn how to kiss, which somehow made him girly and, thus, confused about whether he should actually be a girl. Of course, in the end, his understanding of his gender role as a boy were firmly straightened out by strict-yet-loving family.

Or perhaps another step in this path of hindsight was sneaking into my step-mom’s spare room when I was about twelve and trying on one of her old dresses. At that point, I had yet to become the lummoX that would be my post-pubertal destiny, and so the dress fit, albeit poorly.

Or, hey, skip ahead to 2006, when I had just turned twenty and realized that it felt just as good to role-play online as a vixen as it did as a tod, though I told myself at the time that it was because I wanted to experience more relationship configurations than the male homosexual relationships I’d had to that point.

Each of these things, and so many more, felt like an independent, unconnected occurrence to me. It’s only in hindsight

that I can see that there were aspects of me straining towards some way to feel happy and comfortable. When I was growing up, they were simple oddities, but now just another way to see the present more clearly.

I think that it's fairly common that one comes to terms with a portion of one's identity in this fashion. Before I came out as trans and made the question of sexual orientation at least twice as complicated, I went through the process of figuring out that, despite being born male, I was also attracted to other boys as well as girls. Those 'crushes' in elementary school make more sense, and so on.

There had to be some lever that pushed each of those instances from a collection of loosely related occurrences into the formation of a strong facet of my own identity. With orientation, it was obviously the rush of hormones that came with puberty: all of the sudden, 'liking boys' took on a new tenor.

With gender, it was almost entirely the furry subculture's fault.

I found furry at the age of fourteen or so through the website Yerfl, and later through a FurCode generator. At the time, though gender was quite confusing for me when viewed in hindsight, I identified as a cis gay male. Furry, then, was a welcome haven from home life, where it was cool to be a teenage fox boy thinking about dating other teenage fox boys.

As I grew up and continued in my development as a person, filling in bits of my concept of self as one fills in gaps in a puzzle when the pieces are found, furry helped yet again in providing a framework in exploration and comfort.

Gender expression of the author's character as portrayed in visual commissions over the years.

The figure above shows the ways in which the sex of my characters in art that I commissioned changed over time. On the Y axis, you can see the genders expressed in the commissions, and on the x, the date of the commission. There's a very clear trend from male to genderless, then from genderless to female over time, then from female (as an idealized form of myself) to a specifically trans fox (as I started to get comfortable with my identity as a transgender person). I'm not alone in this progression, either, as many have found the utility in having a mostly safe space in which role-play is common and accepted behavior in which to explore various aspects of their identity.

There's a very good reason for this, too, but first, let's hear from other critters using furry as a lens to help in the explorations of their gender.

When I think of Indi, I think of the colorful coyote/otter (read 'coyotter', or simply 'yotter') that I've gotten to know fairly well over the past few years. When I met ver for the first real time, it was at a room party at a convention, where we were tasting various types of mead. I can't remember if we had made our way to the room party from my invitation or at the behest of our mutual friend, Tealfox. Either way, I was glad to have the chance to meet up.

Over the years, I would find myself catching up with ver again and again. At cons, sure, but also at ver's house with ver's owner Elanna, where I stayed for a few days in order to experience the delight that is Bandaza, a yearly celebration occurring

near the end of November, which involves what must be the greatest concentration of postfurries I've ever seen.

As is perhaps evident from vis pronouns, Indi's identity falls somewhere outside the realm of 'male' or 'female'. Ve describes verself as neutrois transgender, as having a sense of gender that's neither masculine nor feminine nor a combination of the two. This carries over into vis online representation; ve isn't simply a coyotter, but a synthetic one, often plush. After all, while plush toys and other synthetic beings may have a semblance of sexual characteristics, it's easy to imagine them not having an internal sense of identity along binary gender lines.

Ve describes verself as having medically transitioned in order to deal with the body dysphoria (unhappiness with one's form or self) that is part and parcel of being transgender. This helps ver, along with finding modes of presentation to avoid social dysphoria, to exist in a concordant way with the world around ver.

In Indi's words, "Furry helped a lot by being a place where the answers to basic questions of identity (species, gender) are almost always fill-in-the-blank." Some of the best things that furry has to offer is that these things which mean the most to someone working on their own identity are taken at their word. For example, from the point of view of an FtM person — someone transitioning from female to male — to say, "This is what I am, and that's all that you need to know," is huge. The validation that one gains for being taken as and interacted with as what they say they are is no small thing.

Indi writes, "At its best, furry treats identity as consensual and fluid; you are what you say you are, and what you say you

are may change and evolve in the future, temporarily or permanently.”

Although there are many ways in which this can take place, the act of creating one’s own character, the means by which they interact with the rest of the subculture, is something that furry excels at. “Anthropomorphic forms also provide a rich toolkit of options for bodily self-expression,” writes Indi, “With countless species, real and imaginary, and a mix-and-match approach to species signifiers and primary/secondary sexual characteristics. All this allowed me to keep tweaking, trying different ways of being me until I found the one that felt the most comfortable and accurate.”

That said, furry isn’t the haven it might seem to be for someone exploring something as complex as gender.

Indi explains: “In furry chat venues, a common expectation is that sex will happen or at least be discussed, which means many choices about presentation and identity are interpreted in sexual terms.” It’s easy to see the ways in which this could interact with gender, given the complex interactions between sexuality and gender. “The “what do you have in your pants” question, the archetypal inappropriate question for trans folks, is almost always on the table.”

This goes doubly so for non-binary genders. For those who present in a way that lands somewhere between male and female, or outside that spectrum entirely, the issue of attraction and sex can become troubled, as Indi notes, “Further, presentations that seem difficult to interact with sexually, like those that de-emphasize both masculinity and femininity, will generally be given the side-eye or pointedly ignored.”

I met Lumi, on the other hand, shortly before writing this piece when someone retweeted one of her posts. She had lined up drawings of her character over the years, with short explanations, and it was easy to see a similar trend as outlined in my own graph above: her character started male, then began to shift more feminine through a process of experimentation towards the female character she is drawn as to this day, in alignment with her female identity.

“Prior to coming out as female, I talked to some friends about it,” she says. “I struggled a lot with the identity, even after coming out to friends, and then to everyone online. I considered myself non-binary for a while and went by they/them pronouns. This is because I don’t experience much gender dysphoria so I didn’t feel “Trans Enough” to consider myself female.”

This is a sentiment echoed by many as they work their way through figuring out their identity. Non-binary identities are, of course, just as valid as binary identities, and for many, the ‘end goal’ is neither masculine nor feminine, as evidenced by Indi’s journey, while for others, they’re a step on the path. No states of identity can be said to be purely transitional, and none can be said to be purely final.

For Lumi, the non-binary portion of her journey happened to be transitional. “Finally, I settled on female but it still took me a while to “settle in” to being this gender. Since I can remember, people online have always assumed I was a girl anyways. Most people don’t even know I’m trans, since I hardly ever mention it. They just assume I’m a rad cis girl.”

“I feel like a fursona is a reflection of yourself. I don’t believe that my fursona is me, but rather she is like someone I aspire to

be,” Lumi writes, referring to the ways in which furry helped in solidifying identity. “Since she’s a fictional character, it’s always been easy to experiment with her and my gender identity was part of that experimentation. She has always had the ability to shape-shift and I always found myself drawing her as a girl even when she wasn’t.”

On a hunch that these sentiments go far beyond just that small sector of furry, I started a small, informal poll on twitter, and got inundated with responses. The poll itself was simple:

Hi.

Tell me about how furry helped you with figuring out your gender identity!

Thanks.

— Tweet from @drab_makyo on July 6, 2016

The responses were overwhelmingly positive, though some had a few caveats. Many said that the opportunity to create a character as an ideal form of themselves offered them the possibility to find a way to be more true to more aspects of their identity than they might have had in the first place. Furry, it seems, provides a constructive and creative place in order to explore.

You’ll note, however, that I didn’t say ‘safe place’ above. Many of the caveats to furry being a good place to explore gender surround the fact that, in a lot of ways, many furries who identify as trans or non-binary (as well as intersex folks) feel fetishized more often than not. Gender, as we well know, goes far beyond just the interactions of genitalia.

Another caveat that I heard was that, although the subculture provided a healthy means to begin exploring gender, many felt that the thing that helped them mature in their identity

was seeing representation outside of the fandom, as well. This was especially true for some of the non-binary folks that I got the chance to talk with. Some mentioned that their exploration ceased at the point where they created a character for themselves to match their perceived identity and went no further without some external representation.

There's much more that I can say on the matter of why furry might be good for exploration, and I will shortly, but first, there is far more data available than just a single twitter poll! After all, as Executive Data Vix for [adjective][species], it's my job to administer the Furry Poll, the fandom's largest market survey, and then to go for deep dives into that giant pool of data.

To that end, I started pulling some numbers from the 2016 Furry Poll. There were 3194 total responses to look at which were relevant to our topic at hand. Here are the questions that we asked:

What is your age in years?

What best describes your gender identity?

Masculine or mostly masculine

Feminine or mostly feminine

Other (NB: there were a series of options, including a write-in option, which, for our purposes, have been boiled down to an 'other' category.)

Does your gender identity now align with your sex as assigned at birth?

Yes (I am cisgender)

No (I am not cisgender)

It's complicated (exactly what it says on the tin)

What all did we get? Well, nothing too surprising, and let me explain why.

The ideas that we hold to be true without proof comprise ourdoxa. That is, the things we assume to be true, or to be the case without needing to have anything backing those assumptions up. When one looks around the furry fandom at time of writing, one is likely to find a subculture made up mostly of those presenting masculine.

Gender identity of respondents in the 2016 Furry Poll.

To that, the survey offers only confirmation. A bit more than 75% of the respondents — certainly a supermajority — responded that their gender identity was masculine or mostly masculine. Although one's expression or presentation used as a predictor has its flaws, a glance around the average convention space bears truth to this claim: we can mark that down as one point for our doxa reading things correctly.

Gender alignment of respondents in the 2016 Furry.

Now, how about we look at gender alignment; that is, let's take a look at the breakdown of how folks' gender identity aligns with their sex as assigned at birth. For example, a trans man who was assigned female at birth but identifies as a man now, would be someone who would fall under the umbrella term of 'transgender', while a man who was assigned male at birth would fall under the term 'cisgender'. Additionally, for the sake of completeness, the survey also offered the choice for the respondent to answer that the answer was more complicated than these two choices would allow (we did not ask for further details, and had we, we would not, of course, be able to share them while preserving anonymity).

The most noticeable part of this, on the surface, is that one sees a great deal more trans-feminine (those who identify as feminine and yet whose sex as assigned at birth does not match with their identity, in this instance) than trans-masculine folks. It's understandable that the "other" category, small as it is, contain a more even distribution, but given the uneven distribution in reported gender identities, it makes it all the more striking that there are so many trans-feminine respondents.

This is, perhaps, a shadow cast by society at large, making it more enticing for a trans-feminine person to seek refuge in a welcome subculture. For someone assigned feminine at birth to be into stereotypical masculine behavior is not a big deal. We even have a word for that: tomboy. It's value-neutral in many circles, and downright positive in some. But for someone assigned masculine at birth to behave feminine, well, there's a word for that, too: sissy. A welcoming environment for someone to explore along those lines — from masculine to feminine — is, therefore, not so difficult to foresee. It's also why the demographics of those interviewed for this piece fall more along these lines. It has little to do with minimizing the transmasculine experience, and quite a bit to do with the demographics involved.

There is a certain peril to dating not one, but two wordy, genderful critters, and being married to a cisgender gay man who has stayed with me through my own transition (who, for his part, mentioned that the benefit of furry was that it exposed transgender identities to him as something more than what you'd hear from the news, adding to the personhood involved). When I began this project, not only did I have plenty of

story to tell, for myself, but both partners leapt at the chance to help, whether it be through interviewing or through beta reading the final piece.

Forneus and I met over Twitter back in 2011 through a mutual acquaintance, and bonded during an impromptu metal concert in one of the elevators at Further Confusion in 2012. It was loud, there were cats, I stuffed my fursuit paw in someone's mouth by accident. Good times.

Forneus has been with me through most of the time I've been consciously exploring gender. They sat and listened to me complain about the lack of non-binary representation, the problems inherent in getting the requisites met for starting hormone replacement therapy, and the whole process of coming out at work.

At the same time, I was there much of their own journey. While I've landed somewhere on the feminine side of neutral, they have been experiencing things differently: "I'd say I'm somewhere in genderqueer land, leaning feminine. What that means for me: I'm mostly fine with the body I was born with, but my presentation is a lot more "stereotypically" feminine based on modern American stereotypes."

I had the chance to ask them if they felt comfortable expressing their identity both within and outside of furry. "Yeah, for a few reasons," they said. "The consequences that directly impact me are a lot less likely to be problems. I'm not going to lose my job or an opportunity at a job, I'm not going to have to work with the random troll every day, et cetera. It's a lot easier to disengage, I guess, as long as I keep myself honest on it."

“Everyone’s already primed to the concept of an ideal self,” they continued. “Even straight cis[gender] furries, so “my ideal self is me, but with different bits” feels really easy to explain most of the time. [Even] from within the broader trans community, there’s definitely a tendency to feel like I’m not “trans enough””

Outside of furry, though, things were less comfortable. ““If I show up to this interview in a dress, it’ll raise questions” is something I had to deal with a lot during my last job search, for example.” The world at large rarely cares about our ideal selves, and often makes sweeping judgements based on presentation. “I’m not convinced that HRT would be right, so I’m not doing it,” they mention. “The “next step” is coming out at work. I don’t currently feel capable of doing that.”

Lexy, my other partner, expressed similar thoughts. While furry, “helped by having open and kind people to talk with, and to explore gender identity with,” life outside of furry offered much more in the way of obstacles. She hasn’t been able to take many steps yet largely due to family issues, and has described her path as, “Working towards finding a safe environment to transition. I currently feel fairly uncomfortable due to not being able to transition, but overall I feel like furry has helped a lot in feeling more comfortable with myself.”

So is furry a net win, over all, for furries? “Yeah, for sure,” says Forneus. “It’s definitely helped me figure out my own sexuality, if nothing else, and I know a lot of cool trans furries. So that’s pretty helpful too, having good friends with both a shared interest and a nominally-similar life history.”

Lumi agrees: “I’m very comfortable with my identity, and I feel it fits me very well. I almost fell game to the idea of “Well you have to be really girly to be a girl,” but now I’m more like a tomboy girl. Yeah, sometimes I might be rude and I’m not into dresses and makeup, but at the end of the day, I am one cool chick.”

Indi sums things up nicely, saying, “Even three years ago I never would have believed I would be able to go this far, to feel like I’ve almost entirely managed to express myself as the human-AU version of a glowy swishy neutral-gendered rave critter. It hasn’t always been easy, and there’s still a lot that could be done to make it smoother, but I think I’m in a good place. There’s always ways to improve, always new things I think I can try, but each move seems to be smaller than the last, and I’m far more comfortable with myself than I ever could have imagined I’d be when I started trying.”

Given the stories of those exploring and expressing gender and identity through the framework of furry, the obvious next question that needs to be asked is “why?”

Naturally, these sorts of things are not answered by any simple quip, nor even a single article like this. That said, there are some things that we can point to that might help explain just why the furry subculture plays as big a role as it does in the formation of its members’ identities, gender and otherwise.

There are a pair of twinned concepts within the realm of psychology that have been applied to this topic in particular. Aaron Devor, a sociologist and dean of graduate studies at the University of Victoria in Canada, described them most suc-

cinctly in their paper, “Witnessing and Mirroring: A Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Formation.”

The stages themselves are interesting, of course. They describe the path that a trans person might take as they work through the process of coming out, transitioning, and so on. I’m not going to list them here, to save on ink — the paper is free, easy to find legally online, and worth a read on its own. However, I’d like to talk about the twinned concepts mentioned in the title, as they play a much more integral role when it comes to figuring out why furry might be a good place for so many to explore identity.

Witnessing is the idea that we gain something in the way of validation by having others see us as we see ourselves. For someone who is solidifying the image of themselves as they feel others ought to see it, to have someone outside themselves perceive them along those lines is incredibly validating. For trans women to called ma’am, or trans men to be able to use the men’s room, or for non-binary folks to be referred to by their proper pronouns...all of these things are a form of witnessing, and help to reinforce the individual’s sense that they are doing what is best for their life.

To go along with that, mirroring is the idea that we gain validation by way of seeing others who are like us. For folks in the early stages of transitioning, this comes both in the form of seeing other folks in the early stages — the “I can do it too” effect — as well as folks later on in the process — the “See, it can be done” effect. When we see something of ourselves reflected in others, it adds a bit of realism to something that might have once only been a fantasy.

Within my circle of friends, we talk of the ‘gender cascade’. Someone in our lives will come out and start exploring their own gender more openly, and we’ll think to ourselves, “Oh, hm. If they can do it, so can I!” or perhaps, “Goodness, now that I’m confronted with this, I’m starting to question my own identity”. For me, although there were several such people, the one I think of most immediately is Indi; watching his explorations within the realm of gender is what got me to think seriously about all of my own internal struggle about gender identity. He, in turn, had his own influences, stretching all the way back into the distant past, each of whom influenced others, creating a cascading flowchart of gender.

This goes far beyond just our little in-group. Folks have often talked about the cascade, perhaps using terms such as ‘transposion’, or one news source’s amusing choice of ‘transgender mania’. In both cases — either constrained by the constituents of a subculture or relatively unrestricted and part of society at large — those who are questioning their gender, or even those who are certain but unsure of beginning transition, can gain validation through witnessing and mirroring. That is, they can allow themselves to be seen as they are in safe contexts and see others who are like themselves in order to gain the confidence to move forward.

Furry provides fertile soil for this sort of thing due in large part to the fact that we explicitly design the image that others think of when they think of us, through the formation of our personal characters, avatars, or fursonas, however you want to think of it.

If you flip back to the graph of the sex of my characters that were represented in commissioned furry art, you can see a very definite shift away from male. At first, I shifted from masculine to explicitly genderless, because my assigned identity had become so painful to me that my instinct was to escape. From there, as I gained confidence and with validation from others, I started to incorporate more and more feminine aspects into my characters.

Your character is an unspoken-yet-explicit way for a fur to say, “This is how I ought to be seen.” For trans folk, it provides a useful tool in terms of exploring gender identity: although mirroring becomes mudding in many circumstances (for those role-playing as a different gender, being outed as such isn’t exactly desirable), it sure as hell makes witnessing easier. I became a fox girl on the internet long before I got the letter that allowed me to start hormone replacement therapy.

There’s a conclusion that I draw from all of this, though it took me some time to connect the dots, pull it up, draw it all together, and many other metaphors.

When I started associating with animal people on the internet, I did so as a fragile teen who could barely admit that sex was a thing that existed, much less as a being with a sexual orientation, never mind one that might not be straight, or even sexually active. Meeting and interacting with sexual, non-straight, and happy folk helped change that over the process of a few years, and a few halting relationships.

Fast-forward a few years, and there I was: a mid-twenties person in the middle of an identity crisis. What was I? Was I nothing? Sex was a panic-riddled minefield of unmet expecta-

tions and awkward feelings of being built wrong. Was I a woman, with my dreams of motherhood-but-not-fatherhood? Was I something in between, with the fact that womanhood discomfited me in a different way than manhood?

Here, unlike with my orientation, I had enough experience to both look around me and see those going through something similar, as well as to take a step to be seen as who I felt that I might be. I started out haltingly, and went down a few wrong paths (looking at you, plush phase; love me some plushies, but it's not me), but I found myself a niche. It came in the form of a description and a few megabytes of graphical data culled from the minds and tablets of some artistically minded and decidedly amazing friends. It led to me confronting my therapist one day and saying, "Hey, can you write me a hormone letter?"

Fast forward another year or two, and where am I?

I'm putting together the pieces of the fact that this isn't a uniquely trans thing, though this is an article on the intersection between gender and furry. Neither is it a uniquely sexual thing, though the intersection between sex and furry is worth an article of its own. It's something one layer up. It's membership in a community that provides a mechanism and a place for these discoveries to take place.

Is it a uniquely furry thing? Almost certainly not. There are many different subcultures out there that follow the same pattern. The My Little Pony fandom is a wonderful example, providing a similar outlet to those who claim membership. However, there's no doubt that furry played a rather large role in identity for me, just as it did for so many other folks. There's just so much to be said for the fact that we build the avatars that we

use to interact with others here, beyond even what many other subcultures do.

Without furry, I might just as well have come out as gay, then neutrois, then genderqueer, then trans, then all of those other wonderful labels. But would I have felt safe doing so? Would I have gotten all of the validation that I needed to feel healthy doing so? Would I have come away with countless other brothers, sisters, and non-binary siblings in whom I could confide, admire, and rejoice?

I don't know. There's a lot to account for. My life has treated me well, in all, and I feel privileged to have lived it. That said, I'm not convinced that there would be an outlet that would have provided such for me.

Would there be one, outside of furry? I rather think not.

Chapter 31

Species Selection and Character Creation — Part 1

August 7, 2013

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 furies 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 furies 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 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:

We see our previously tagged set of words such as ‘traits’, ‘personality’, and ‘always’ (left in* 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.

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 furies. 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 furies, 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 lampshading 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 subgroups 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. Unfor-

tunately, 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](#).

* 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.

** Cats, cheetahs, coyotes, dragons, red foxes, horses, huskies, jackals, rabbits, tigers, and wolves.

Chapter 32

Species Selection and Character Creation — Part 2

August 3, 2013

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 person-

able “meow!”) where I would spend a few hours talking with the inimitable Klisoura about furies 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!

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[gallery ids="1480,1481,1482,1483,1484,1485,1486,1487,1488,1489"
orderby="rand"]
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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 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.

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. How-

ever, 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 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 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. They 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 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 Creation 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 sentiment is perhaps best expressed by FA user NEXRAD in their commentson the Jackals/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 anyone 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 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 enough, we’ll pull them together and put them up on Vimeo as we did last year.

Part III

Interconnectivity

Chapter 33

Just Like the Rest

November 2, 2011

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

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

The nice folk - a few who are probably a Kinsey 6, but most who are somewhere less than that - tend to just ignore the topic.

A few who are feeling pretty snarky or eager to fit into the very-gay scene will pull the “ew girls!” card out and wave it around.

The token straight guy will start “throwing people out the window”.

Any girls present seem to fall into two categories:

Those with female players will likely roll their eyes. Whether they act that out on the MUCK or not is up in the air.

Those with male players will pout, get defensive, or say nothing, depending on why they’re pretending to be a female animal-person on the internet.

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

While I don’t remember for sure, what I think happened is that I was dwelling on this as it was happening some time around early 2007. It was a pretty introspective time of my life, with bits of college working out very well while others collapsed around me in ruins. I was spending a lot of time reminiscing about high school and the way I had changed as I grew up. When I was depressed, it would border on “where did I go wrong?”, and when I wasn’t, it tended towards “how did I get here and how can I get where I want?”. It was the romantic, introspective springtime of youth that all young foxes must go through at some point or another.

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

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

I feel it’s important that I say that I love all the wonderful people I’ve met online and in the Nurple especially, and I re-

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

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

After I'd suffered my sea change, however, the boundaries between our little (or big) groups and the world around us started to blur, for me. I saw the same societal currents moving within the fandom that were moving in the world around me, and I began to see furries more as a group of mostly middle class, mostly western, mostly young adults.

The changes in perspective were subtle at first. "Perhaps furry is just more welcoming of the misfits and the minorities

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

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

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

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

Chapter 34

First Impressions

November 30, 2011

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

We're used to multi-layered channels of communication, in this fandom. With the majority of our interaction taking place online, we talk, role play, and chat plenty, but we're usually not

doing only that. There is still the base layer of our communication online, the words and ideas going from one person to another, or among several people, but there are several things that change the way we interact, and especially change first impressions. When we meet someone for the first time online, we have plenty of subtle ways of extracting information from or about them, and several of them without the other person's knowledge that we're doing so.

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

It's not just on MUCKs that we have these additional layers of subliminal conversation going on. Even on IRC where such commands are much more limited, we still have the rest of the internet available to us, and by far, FurAffinity has changed and

helped this the most. As soon as you see someone's name online, there's a good chance that you'll be able to just look them up on FA and find out a good deal about them, from where they live to the types of things they're into judging by the art they favorite there. FA isn't the only site out there, of course, and you can also find out much more explicit detail on sites like F-List and The Rabbit Hole, not to mention other art sites like VCL, SoFurry, and e621.

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

If you meet someone within the fandom now, it's easy to find out more information on them than you would ever find out otherwise. Friendships are formed more quickly than outside the subculture and are based on much more in-depth knowl-

edge of each other. Add in the benefit of sex without physical consequences through playing around online and you've got a strange basis for a culture that relies almost entirely on a multi-layered channel of communication. The more I think about how different these first and lasting impressions are within the fandom, the more I think it stems from the previously mentioned difference between character and self that is inherent within furry: we are so eager to use any tools available to us to more completely represent our characters online that we're willing to change the basics of personal interaction in order to accomplish it. Add in the anonymity provided by the internet and you have a whole subculture that is far more willing to share personal details with those that they haven't even met yet than most any group out there, online or offline.

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

Beyond that, however, I wonder just how much of our in-depth first impressions translate outside of the fandom, but into

other, tightly knit groups. If, say, an academic winds up at SIGGRAPH or a designer winds up at TED, meets someone in the halls, and notices a convention badge with a name on it, chances are good that they'll be able to go check on their work somewhere on the internet. However, these examples are academic and professional, not social, and I haven't had the opportunity to go to, say, an anime or comic convention to see if lasting personal or even sexual relationships are formed in quite the same way as they are within our own subculture. Would I be able to go to Nan Desu Kan, a local anime convention, and expect to meet two or three people there whom I would be able to instantly look up on my intelligent telephone, know intimate details about, form lasting friendships with?

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

Chapter 35

Dressing Up

December 14, 2011

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

Fursuiting is clinal, a gradient from one end of the spectrum to the other. It can be very meaningful, where putting on the suit makes the wearer into their character, or as close as possible. Or it can be relatively meaningless, where suiting is closer

to a job than anything, something you do rather than something you are. Along the way, the amount of meaning passes through the still very meaningful desire to at least look like one's character, to enjoying the act of costuming itself, to enjoying the varied social interaction that comes with wearing a full-body costume somewhere other than Halloween.

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

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

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

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

That was about the time I started to realize the diversity apparent within a subculture of a subculture. There was more, I figured, to wearing a fursuit than just getting closer to your character, being your avatar. It was a whole different way of interacting with those around you, whether you're one of those suiters that never talks or one that rambles on in suit (I am, of course, the latter). Having asked, there are those who do feel like it brings out aspects of their personality that bring themselves closer to their character, but that's not the only way of

looking at it out there: there are those who find them sexually attractive, those that like them because of the social interaction with those who aren't necessarily part of the fandom (interacting with kids is mentioned as being particularly awesome), and those for whom it is a living. It's a whole spectrum, just as are other aspects of furry, but it comes with its own culture: listen in on conversations in a headless lounge and they're most certainly unique.

Things aren't all sunshine and roses, of course. One of the first things I found out once I got my suit was how to clean it, and how divisive such an act was. There are currents and trends of thought within the suiting culture just as there are within furry as a whole, and something as simple as washing a portion of your suit can cause strife. Having personally known the maker of my suit, I trusted her when she gave me instructions for washing not only the bodysuit but also the head in the washing machine. However, even after she posted a video of how she cleans her own and her customer's fursuit heads without harm, others within the fandom insisted that she was damaging the heads that she had made, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. Similar discussions rage around how best to transport your suit from place to place, particularly on a plane. Any fursuit lounge is bound to be filled nearly to the brim with Rubbermaid Action Packers, while anyone (say, yours truly) who travels with his suit in a duffel is scoffed at openly.

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

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

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

The Maker- The Maker is closely related to the Talker and the Toucher, though obviously more innocent than either. They will spend a lot of time touching you while talking out of char-

acter. The whole time, though, rather than grabbing at your crotch, they're feeling along the seams of your suit or inspecting the eyes' construction, all while talking about air-brushing or fur selection. While not quite as offensive as the Talker or the Toucher, this is nonetheless still quite awkward for someone who most certainly did not make their own suit.

The Fursuit Hater- I don't know what to do about it. Look, I'm sorry that I'm a grown-ass man dressed as a giant otter among a bunch of other grown-ass men. I'm having fun, others are having fun, and those that aren't are doing something else. Why do you need to tell me that fursuits are creepy and probably gross and covered in semen and countless other things I really don't care to hear about. You pretend to be an animal-person, too.

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

Even with the occasional bad apple, it's definitely more fun than not to pretend to be an animal person, or at least interact

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

Chapter 36

Convention Mystique

December 21, 2011

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

With the lack of sleep and my excitement, I was basically useless for the first day of the convention. I got into Philadelphia

at around 2:30 or so in the afternoon and to the hotel by 3PM. I stumbled into the lobby and met, for the first time, my friends, some of whom I had known for five years, by that point.

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

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

Having started to interact more with furs offline, however, much of my fears were allayed, and I warmed quickly to the concept of heading out to a convention. The people I had been meeting were normal people, and we had a ready-made topic of conversation. I figured things would be fine with a few more of them around. I pulled my money together and flew out to the final Anthrocon in Philly. Rather than finding a bunch of normal people milling around with a ready-made topic of conversation, though, I found that conventions were a little more complicated than just that.

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

It also helped drive home the idea that conventions are more than just a bunch of people interacting in person rather than online. I talked to several of my friends that I had met at the local furmeet online and interacting in either location was just a matter of either typing or talking, it didn't matter which. A convention, however, is more a unique medium. It's not just a

big furmeet, and it's not just furies interacting offline instead of on; everything works slightly differently in a con setting. It's as if, after a certain number of attendees (lets say twenty five), or in a certain location (almost always a hotel), we cease being interested parties and become a little society of our own, with our own mores and modes of interaction.

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

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

The New Attendee- Bright eyed, in the throes of ecstasy, the new attendee is easy to pick out from all other groups (except-

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

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

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

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

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

There's another universal almost too obvious to mention: convention badges. Most any convention has their own, obviously, but within our fandom, it's customary to not only wear the membership badge, but also art badges created specifically for the wearer. These small, commissioned bits of wearable art represent the owner's character, another unique artifact of the difference between our selves and our characters. So unique, in fact, that, concurrent with the upcoming Further Confusion, there will be a portion of a gallery exhibition in San Jose dedicated strictly to the art of the con badge. They act as a way to help carry our characters into our real-life interactions and blur the line between the two somewhat. We may not all be dressed up like our creations, nor can we all swish and bark and so on, but at least we have a sign of just who we are visible to those around us.

Of course, anyone who has been to a furry convention knows the basic duck-and-weave of the con greeting. With the near-absolute saturation of con badges, it's become standard practice to approach someone looking at their chest, sleeves, or belt, wherever they've hung their badges. Depending on how friendly you are and whether or not you know the other person,

you might jump straight into a hug after that, or start chattering right away. If you don't know them, of course, you still know more about them after that brief glance than you might if you had just met on the street, and that's something we've written about before. It gives a whole new meaning to "my face is up here" (and, of course, if you put a QR code on your badge, now they're pointing a camera at their chest...).

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

I'll see you guys at Further Confusion 2012!

Chapter 37

Online Relationships

December 28, 2011

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

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

I am no stranger to online relationships. Far from it, in fact: I think I can say that my online relationships outnumber my in-person relationships two or even three to one. One of the big draws to having a relationship online in a culture that is based in large part on the Internet is that you gain the advantage of the selection bias: by interacting in a primarily furry setting, you have at your disposal for potential partners primarily furries. A good part of a relationship lies in having a good deal in common with your partner, and that is almost built into the fandom. You likely have a group of people with similar levels of technological aptitude, a ready-made shared interest in anthropomorphics,

and you don't have to explain your activities to your partner. That you share this ahead of time makes a good case for dating within the fandom. It's simply easier, perhaps healthier to be in a relationship with another furry.

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

Another thing that that relationship lacked was not only the interaction between the two parties on a personal level, but interaction on a character level. Even though my fiancé and I rarely talk online (he's a terrible speller - sorry, James!), we still have this multi-layered relationship that may be essential for a couple within the fandom. For furies, you have to interact well as a couple not only on a personal level, but as charac-

ters and vice versa, and this is one of the reasons several of my other relationships did not work out quite as well as either party had hoped. Although things may have been spectacular or mind blowing online, you're just not really an eFox or iWolf in person (probably). Species aside, our characters are very much front-stage constructs, in the Erving Goffman sense. We build up these characters to emphasize or even take on attributes that may be lacking in us, and that's what helps to make them a separate entity from our true self. It's amazing to think back on all of the wonderful times I have had over the years in the relationships I've been a part of and realize that, when thought of that way, it's like watching two completely separate people fall in love: my iFox to your eWhatever, and you and I are only the narrators, or the readers of a story.

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

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

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

This is not to say that we're all nerds or anything. In fact, I'm pretty sure that much of the stigma that affects "nerds" outside the fandom translates to within it as well. Rather, we are a group of people that has embraced the technology around us and made it part of our lives, even if we don't necessarily know, or even

care how it works. We may not always be cutting edge, but we are contemporary with our generations, and maybe even a little ahead of the game, in general, and that may just serve as the basis for much of the social interaction within our subculture, and the relationships within that, taking at least second-seat to our interest in anthropomorphising animals.

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

Some things are better enjoyed alone.

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

rating ourselves from those around us to figure out what's going on within us.

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

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

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

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

I never claimed to not be a nerd.

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

Of course, this is a long way around back to furies, and I'm sure there's some far better term to be used besides "triangulation of self". It is important though, given how robust a subculture furry has become due to this interconnectedness

of its members. We, as a group, rely on our social interactions to perpetuate our interest in anthropomorphics in art, in communication, and in self expression. All of this, combined with our loose and varied definition of what we actually are leads to our strength through our plasticity. That is, our strength comes from our ability to reshape the community, or even our views of the community, allowing us to thrive and grow over time.

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

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

readers. [adjective][species] is its own little community, in a way.

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

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

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

in certain ways in order to shape the way they're viewed, and identify themselves through the process.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 38

The Dramagogues

February 29, 2012

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

There is no metric of drama. It's a hard thing to gauge and an even harder thing to gauge objectively. To say that furry is

more dramatic than other groups, or more dramatic than life in general or simply the non-furry portion is a hard statement to back up. Is the drama more intense or less? Does it happen more frequently or less frequently? Is it more or less legitimate? Or important? Rooted in reality? That there are even so many questions in the second paragraph of a write-up on the subject bodes ill for saying, definitively, whether or not furry is more dramatic. Instead of trying to determine one way or another on the issue, I think it would be best to explore why this either may be the case or at least why many of us believe it is. I asked this as a quick poll on twitter a while back, so I'm going to structure the first two parts of this article around the responses I received to the two parts of the question that I posted, starting with one of my own views, while the third portion will be more about the duration of dramatic events in the fandom, with potential future exploration down the line.

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

share more than just our interests and some of our mannerisms, that they will also share our opinions and our eccentricities.

Part of why I started to see this was due to the fact tht many conciliatory efforts that I saw being made publicly were posited as diplomatic ways of informing one on how to interact with others. However, many of these efforts come off more as ways to successfully interact with whichever party posited them. That is, the one who attempted to solve the problem did so by assuming the embroiled parties (even if they were one themselves) saw things the same way that they did. While it may seem like we're a collection of mostly canids and there is a lot of self-similarity in character creation and our shared interests, we're just not that much alike.

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

In the long run, I really shouldn't have been surprised that I ran into other "Ranna"s out there. We all wanted to be sure in our own little parts of the fandom, though, and so actually running into someone with the same name was a bit of a shock.

The fandom just wasn't big enough to hold that, though, and so we run into all these instances of people knowing friends we thought they would never know, and we find out that those friends maybe know much more about us and our relationships than we had previously thought - this was something that happened to be twice within the past few weeks, actually: a friend I had known for a while under a different name didn't know that I wrote for [adjective][species].

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

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

- krtbuni

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

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

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

– _am3thyst

This is similar to the above quote in that it has to do with the fact that we are members of a commu-

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

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

* Adonai_Rifki

You know, it may just be due to the online nature of many of our interactions that the perceived level of drama is so high within the fandom. Having spent a good portion of my childhood years with a step-brother and two step-sisters taught me that there is, indeed, plenty of drama in the real world. I used to keep a toy on the frame of my step-brother's and my bunk bed that I would move from one end of the bed to the other as he annoyed me to sleep - my own version of "I'm going to count to three..." - which of course just caused him to act out all the more and led to fights. I was a real brat, growing up... So really, being around drama wasn't something that's unique or new when I joined the fandom, I had been around it all the while growing up.

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

In the next episode of *The Dramagogues*, we'll be looking into potential reasons why the fandom might either be more dramatic or think it's more dramatic than the world around it.

In the last post about drama, I wondered whether or not we, as a community, really were more dramatic than those around us, and if so, why, or if not, why we seem to think we are. Much of the content of that post came from responses to a few questions on twitter. Perhaps the best thing about our fandom is our

willingness and ability to communicate, and that really is the basis of much of these articles, I had asked previously whether or not we were more dramatic and why, and gotten several very succinct answers as to why that might be the case. Beyond that, however, I also asked if our drama is in some way different than that in the world around us, and got several additional responses to this question, which is the basis for this, the second episode of The Dramagogues.

Yes. Furry drama sheds and gets all over everybody.

—rustitobuck

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

We are so eager to appropriate things around us in the name of our fandom that it could be that, whether or not our drama is indeed all that different, we have made it ours. It may be just drama, but, being involved in the fandom, it becomes Furry Drama. There are, of course, some issues that may be unique to our subculture such as the intellectual property one has in a character, but it feels sometimes as though we could stick cat

ears and a tail on any old problem and turn it into a furry problem. If you get short changed at the farmers market, you can complain about it, and if the artist you paid \$5 for an icon takes a few days too long, you can do much the same, but it's now possible to make it into a furry problem.

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

–_am3thyst

Another way to look the same issue is to consider that our drama is simply an artifact of us being a slice of humanity as a whole. Humans have their own little dramas that are being played out all the time. However, humans aren't a small, rather tightly knit group of people with many things in common. While all our problems may be relatively human, it could be that we just read more deeply into them because of our commonalities. On the other side, because we read so deeply into them, we do tend to be more focused on the day-to-day human dramas of our fellows. I think that may indeed be why we are so closely knitting the first place, at least in part.

This is one of those good-for-you scenarios. Even though the drama around us is...well, drama, it's still an instance of us interacting, which is a good thing, and the fact that we are so emotionally tied to the issues at hand is evidence of our emotional investment within the fandom. I used to wonder what the fandom would be like without all of the drama that seems to come with the package, and I think I've come to the conclusion that I just wouldn't like it that much. It's not that it's comforting by itself, so much as that it's evidence of how much we care about our hobby. If furry were something where being involved

didn't mean enough for one to get emotionally invested, really don't think that it would be something that I would've stuck with this long, nor something that would've grown as fast as it has, even if it means focusing on our all-to-human problems.

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

–Adonai_Rifki

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

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

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

–mousit

On the other hand, perhaps it's not our membership to the fandom that makes us so keyed into each other's drama, and our drama seems different and out of proportion because we happen to be tech-savvy people. The benefit of anonymity provided

by the Internet, or at least a lack of direct consequences for our words and actions could be part of why it's so easy to turn any little thing into drama. Perhaps our reliance on such a medium in order to properly express ourselves has its downsides: both an enhanced sensitivity to the language used around us (due to its relative permanence as compared to speech) and the ability to maintain a structured, even institutionalized facade presented to those around us.

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

In furry, this structured presentation of self has become institutionalized in the concept of one's character, no matter how tightly associated the individual is with it. Even on visual media such as SecondLife, our interactions take place as structured language intentionally built to deceive, in a way. We intend to

show ourselves as our characters and we write carefully in order to do so. Perhaps this is a symptom of furry, but it seems as though it's built into the Internet as a whole. The ability to maintain near-real-time communication using text allows one to build up whatever facade they wish while still coming off as a real person. The drama here comes up when a bit of that facade slips or is let down in order to share an honest opinion with someone, or let loose with some previously hidden emotions. This happened nearly as often in the boards I had been a member of as it does within furry, but seeing as how we were all a bunch of hormone-saturated teenagers, I had chalked it up to that, instead. Having been around the 'net as an adult now, I can say that we're just as childish (if not moreso, sometimes) as we were when we were teenagers when presented with the opportunity for anonymity, however partial.

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

Tune in next time as we look at the way drama changes and fluctuates over time within the fandom, as well as how that is similar and different from the world at large. The Drama-

gogues, only on [adjective][species]! Wednesdays, 12pm mountain! (Okay, so I wouldn't do well in TV...)

How many of you remember Sibe and Furry XDCC?

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

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

Those were all pretty big deals! Remember them?

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

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

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

A lot of words and phrases will come readily to mind, here, and the one that will most likely leap to the forefront is ‘viral’ or ‘going viral’, or perhaps ‘meme’. An idea like this will start with an individual or small group within our subculture, pick up a few more individuals, then explode in popularity until it seems like every other journal going through our FA feeds has to do with that one particular thing. After a while, you start seeing the “stop posting x” or “snarky comment about x” journals mingling in with the rest as the sheer amount of participants seems to plateau at some invisible high-water mark and slowly fade out after that. There may be a journal or two, then simply a reference or two within a few journals here and there. Finally...nothing.

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

Similarly, within our fandom, just as an issue starts to become commonplace (such as the cub-porn ban on FA) or even fade out (such as the Kristal-can’t-enjoy-sandwich meme), only a short lull follows before the next surge rockets off from obscu-

rity into brief popularity. The concept of strife at the dovetail fits at least a little bit here, though it may be a bit of a stretch, as we're not talking about world-wide wars. Instead, an event such as rumors that PayPal will flag your account if you mention FurAffinity in the message section of your transaction will trigger the next arch, and once that diminishes, we'll switch to perhaps a tracing scandal, or maybe a rumor about Sonic art being banned.

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

In our so thoroughly connected culture, we've picked up an incredible amount of communication. It ties us together more thoroughly than any previous era, that's for sure. On the flip side, however, we have picked up this shorter attention span leading to these more frequent waves of stress and drama.

I don't mean to come off as a get-off-my-lawn,curmudgeonlyLuddite. I did preface that statement with how neat our new-found interconnectedness is, and I am writing this on a website, which will be published to three

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

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

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

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

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

Members caring about something enough to convince others to do the same, if only briefly.

This is the final planned installment of The Dramagogues. I hope that it's been enjoyable so far, and thanks for your patience on this last article!

Chapter 39

Death in the Fandom

March 28, 2012

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

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

Thirty years, in the grand scheme of things isn't really all that long of a time. The United States has lasted eight times that long, Christianity approaching 70 times, and, according to some, the universe almost 200 times that long, and that number is con-

sidered very, very small by many others. Our vibrancy and social currency is strong, but we are not the only group on the rise out there. In western culture, the anime fan base is taking a similar track, as have countless other subcultures and fandoms before it. Our output is copious and so, in turn, is our social currency, but they are not out of proportion.

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

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

Death and the larger concept of mortality have been our fixation for almost all of recorded history. It's arguable, really, that death and mortality have been the fixation of life for its entire existence here on earth. It's something of a milestone in life when we start to realize that we're mortal, that we will end and that at that point, something fundamental about our existence will change, whether it's entering into heaven or simply the same unknown we return to that we were a part of before birth. For me, it was about the time I turned eight or nine and,

leaning against my mother's front while watching TV, I heard her heartbeat and it hit me, in a very logical fashion, that at some point that heartbeat would stop and my mom would be no more. I suppose it happens to everyone now and then, but from an individual's perspective, the idea that life will eventually come to a stop is something that focuses the mind and all but forces introspection.

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

We have at least two benefits within furry, however. First of all, we're still relatively small. The Tucholsky quip that "The death of one man: that is a catastrophe. One hundred thousand deaths: that is a statistic!" would be difficult to hold true in our subculture of one or two hundreds of thousands (an arguable point, I'm sure). For us, one death is a tragedy, but given our small size, any number of deaths would likely be as much a tragedy. Much of the basis for this quote has to do with Dunbar's number, the suggested limit of stable relationships one in-

dividual can maintain; with a community of our size and a rough estimate of perhaps 150 for Dunbar's number, that means that, no matter what, in the event of a catastrophe, the chances of one being directly affected, either through personal involvement or a personal relationship, are much, much higher.

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

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

Nothing is ever quite so simple, of course, and there are a few downsides and negative aspects to our relationship with

death. Primarily, just because we know or know of someone does not necessarily mean that we like them. Many simply keep their peace in such situations, but some have noticed that individuals will occasionally create puppet-accounts on social sites in order to post a negative comment or two, or even use their own account to rail against the deceased or their loved ones. I feel that much of this is likely due to the anonymity provided by interactions on the Internet, but I could be wrong. Perhaps there is an additional aspect to our social nature or our tightly-knit web of relationships that makes it easier for one to express their views, both positive and negative, but that said, I hear far, far less about this happening in person than online.

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

In the end, however, death within the fandom is still something that strikes us strongly. Perhaps it's due to our small size, or our tightly-woven net of interpersonal relationships, or even due to the online nature of much of our interaction, but no mat-

ter what, it's comforting to know that there are those out there who, whether or not they knew us, would feel our loss. So let this article stand in memoriam of FirePyro and Athus, Waarhorse and Randomonlooker, Ponybird and Loki, and all the others who have entered into our lives through furry and then gone. I'm opening up a topic in the forums for additional names to be added to the list; if the fandom has lost someone in particular that you know of, feel free to add them to the list of those to be remembered.

Chapter 40

On Money

June 14, 2012

Like many of those who identify as members of the furry fandom, I joined at a relatively young age. I was reminded of this, recently, when a friend from years ago came out to visit, this last weekend. When he and I were talking most frequently, that was eleven or twelve years ago, which would've made me (gulp) fourteen or fifteen. I've been dwelling on that point for the last few days, as I worked up the outline of the rest of this article, and things finally fell into place when I consider who I was and where I was in life at that time. I was young, for sure, and just getting into the whole furry thing, watching artists on Yerf and VCL (and Side7 and Elfwood, oh man...) create these awesome drawings, most of which seemed to be spur of the moment things, or works of art created for the sake of creating art. Some, however, were commissions, and that was something I just could not fathom.

An artist - someone I didn't even know - would draw whatever I told them. For money!

It boggled the mind, to be sure. I found the concept amazing, and spent all of thirty seconds researching the idea before noticing the price of a commission: \$50. At the time, I made that much in two months of allowance. Once I could drive, my allowance went up, but then I was expected to pay for my own gas as I drove back and forth a few times a week between my mom's and dad's houses in the decidedly fuel inefficient junker I had been lent. It wouldn't be until I was a few years into college that I paid an artist for a commission of my character.

Money plays a not insignificant part in our fandom. While art was, for a while, the thing that everyone tried, there was still a growing, core group of artists that provided much of the output and garnered much of the attention by offering a steady stream of commissions and filling our VCL feeds, at first, and then our FA watch lists. For those who are unable to draw their characters to their own satisfaction, all it took was a few bucks, or a few hundred, dropped on a commission, a short, or long, wait, et voila, your character in a visible format to share with the world. The financial transactions became more pronounced as fursuiting began to gain in popularity, as the core group manufacturing some of the most visible fursuits was even smaller, and the price point higher. Finally, conventions offer their own unique financial burden for those involved, whether it's simply the cost of attending one's local convention or the price of airfare halfway around the world to attend a con in another country.

However, there seems to be some additional doxa surrounding money within the furry fandom. The “poor fur versus the rich fur”, for example, is a trope that plays itself out regularly in the comments on images and journals on FurAffinity, particularly on the post of an artist offering commissions. It usually begins with an “I would, but I can’t afford it” comment, and can often spiral into an argument from there. Much has been written on this in the past, as this seems to stem from the idea of the poor envying the rich and the lifestyle that they represent, but in this case, the leisure either perceived or imagined, takes the format of numerous commissions, a fursuit, and regular attendance at popular conventions.

This ties into another example of the layers of meaning around money within the fandom: being judged on the amount and status of one’s material possessions, usually in the form of commissions. A good example would be the non-artist who commissions countless pieces and reposts them all to FA, garnering followers and social status by spending money. That is, of course, a cynical way of looking at it, and perhaps a more kind-hearted explanation is that the individual is very much into the visual representation of their character, and has the money to spend to make that happen. Either way, the fact that the idea of a member of the fandom gaining social standing by purchasing drawings of themselves, as it were, points to the fact that this is something we take into account on some level when interacting with those around us. After all, if someone has plentiful drawings of their character in a myriad of styles, it’s certainly easier to picture interacting with them in some sort of furry world during RP, to name only one perceived benefit.

The idea goes beyond just the consumers, however, and extends even to the creators. We all know the overextended artist, ever taking more commissions without finishing the previous batch, their work-load piling up as they offer reassurances with one hand and sketch-stream commissions with the other. Or there is also the under-priced artist, who has decided on \$5 as a good price for a sketch, \$10 for color, \$15 for shaded despite the obvious quality of their work and the time spent on it. There are countless additional tropes involving the artist and the role they play with the audience and their patrons, however, and many surround the idea of money within the fandom.

“So what, you ridiculously wordy fox?” I hear you saying. “What’s the big deal? We’re a subculture dominated by westerners, and those western types tend to be capitalists; is it really so surprising that money would play a large factor in our fandom?”

Well, no, it’s not surprising in and of itself. Within a western capitalist society, money is exchanged for goods or services in order to represent a fair trade for work performed. To extend that into our own social group is only second nature: we offer money in return for the work of rendering our characters visually, for a costume that we can put on in order to act the part, or for the chance to go visit hundreds (or thousands - hey folks at AC!) of like-minded individuals in one spot for a wonderful weekend or two a year.

What is interesting, however, is the complex interaction between cash-money and social currency, which features prominently in our interactions. I’m not kidding when I say “complex”, either. Social currency and financial currency are two

topics that are, on the surface, linked: by creating something worth buying, you are, in effect, making something which has improved your social standing. Capitalist societies don't necessarily work this way, of course, and so the relationship between the two exists in a sort of tension revolving around worth: "is this worth something?", "am I worth what I'm paid?", "what worth would I gain by having more images of a fox-man I claim is me?". Rather, it's likely more instructive to examine the ways in which money aids and hinders social currency within the fandom.

The number one way in which having more money would aid one's social standing is by being a party to the act of creation. The root concept of a commission is that of two parties, the artist and the patron, working together to create an item worth something by each contributing something of worth. For the artist, this is their talent, skill, and time; and for the patron, it is their ideas and character or characters - the subject matter. Money changes hands, here, and social currency is boosted. The purpose of the money is to offer something in exchange for the patron's boost in social currency; the artist can create their own by producing works that are not commissions, such as their own personal art or art to sell in one form or another.

Perhaps a more simple example, however, is the convention. For a convention, the attendee is willing to exchange money for social interaction. Social interaction of any kind works into one's social standing, and increasing the outlets and venues for that interaction helps to diversify one's standing. It always helps to prove that one is not simply some sort of program on

the Internet, nor a meat popsicle incapable of interacting with others.

Where does money hinder social currency, then? Well, one of the primary ways in which the two oppose each other is the increased divisiveness that is inherently part of a financial class-structure. The whole rich/poor distinction can be taken on an individual basis and split further into richer-than-me/poorer-than-me and does play a factor in our lives no matter how much we intend to keep it at bay. Being able to interact effectively across perceived financial boundaries is part of learning to live within a hierarchy, after all. Within the fandom, this shows its face in myriad ways: the artist who takes on several inexpensive commissions to make rent, the fan who overspends in order to be able to attend a convention, or even the aforementioned comments on commission posts about not having enough money and the wrangles that ensue.

Beyond that, however, financial and social currency do not map exactly onto each other. That is, a monetary expenditure is not correlated one hundred percent with a social currency gain. At times, it can seem to be the opposite - when one first gets a commission from an artist of some renown, the number of page-views skyrockets, new faves, new watches, and new comments all seem to come in a flood. However, comparing that with the faves, comments, and views of some other commissioners, even of the renowned artist's post of the same image, can be a little disheartening. It's in our nature to compare, as was mentioned, and noting that our own meager following seem to be the only ones appreciating our post as compared to that of the artist shows what appears to be a disparity in gain: we gained

our social status through our financial contribution, and it's up to us to ensure that the gain was worth the money we spent.

This division of worth is a complex and difficult one to understand, of course, and I know that I am oversimplifying greatly here by leaving out aspects such as personal and aesthetic worth gained from things such as commissioned art and fursuits, not to mention the intensely personal gain experienced from seeing a loved one at a convention felt by many. However, it was enough to broach the subject: money is one of those strangely simple ideas that has grown strangely complex ancillary meanings over time, and the concept is not made any simpler by pitting it against the nuances of social standing and currency that are so important within our subculture.

There is still room to explore, of course. Without spoiling too much of what I have planned, I would like to explore both the concept of business and its interaction with our subculture - whether it's a furry business or a non-furry business targeting furies - as well as more from the creator's side of the trade, and what all it means to take money in order to produce a representation of someone else's character. An exchange, whether of trust and social standing or of simple monetary funds, is a complicated thing, and we are continually carving out our own niche, making our own markets, and coming across our own problems in that arena.

Chapter 41

On Giving

December 19, 2012

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 furrries 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*. 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. Firrstarted 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**. We weren't the only ones inspired, either; KalypsoPuppyset 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 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 indi-

viduals 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 furrries 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.

- 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.

** 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 KalyppoPuppy and their matcher adding \$216 to that.

Chapter 42

Furries and Music

January 30, 2013

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 more so 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 43

Leadership in a Decentralized Subculture

March 20, 2013

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, we’re 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 dis-

trict 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. It's 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 don't” 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. It's almost a type of group-think at times, as after all, we're already trained to think along similar lines, given that we're 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 un-

intentionally. 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 suit’s 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 muddled word if ever there was one), but that certainly isn’t 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 Ruaidri’s art. However, this extends far beyond that, and fursuits are another place in which this is visible. A certain manufacturer’s 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 it’s 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 don't think so. It's 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. We’re 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 furies; something which has been accomplished in increasingly wonderful variety over the years.

It’s 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 on-line 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, it’s 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 don’t 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 don’t 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 it’s refreshing in a way, for a good number of us, to be a part of something that doesn’t quite follow the same hierarchical strictures of so much of the rest of society. It’s 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.

Chapter 44

Appropriation in Furry

April 10, 2013

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 Amer-

ican 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.

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.

Chapter 45

An Argument for Nonconformity

June 19, 2013

Okay, so the title is a bit grandiose.

I want to address some of the ideas that JM's previous article brought up for me. It's 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 I'm 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 I’d 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 or 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 it's 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, we're 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 that's 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 describe 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. I’ll 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 one’s 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 one’s point being made forcefully.*

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 re-

main precisely where it is, as it is. This is all well and good for those within the culture who benefit from that stasis, but this isn't the case for everyone, and often isn't 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, let's tie this back to furry and the idea of conformity.

When it comes to JM's 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 one's standing within that culture by not, say, wearing a collar to one's 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 one's goals within the fandom (EF2015 sounds like a good idea - JD's 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 stand-

point 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.

* 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: there's a ton out there.

Chapter 46

The Importance of Roleplay — Part 1

June 29, 2013

Sexual maturation is a process that, I would argue, lasts easily ten years, if not more. Sure, the body may be just about done with the surge of hormones after a few short years, and you probably stop growing (and start shrinking) at around eighteen to twenty years old, but the process of maturation is far more than physical. Even if it were to take an additional year to digest each year of puberty's changes, a generous estimate, that still only gets you to about twenty. In my case, I would say that it took another five years to fully grow into myself as a sexual person; that is, as someone who was not only capable of having sex, but someone who was capable of sexual interaction, in all the ways that implies, with others around me.

Honestly, I matured as a sexual being primarily online, and it was through text and within the context of furry that I expe-

rienced many of my most formative sexual experiences. Role-play, TinySex, cybering, type-fucking, co-authoring erotica - whatever you want to call it, the sharing of sexual acts and ideas across distances and through text does play quite a role within the furry fandom. And, for better or for worse, I think I'm hardly alone in the style of my coming-of-age.

I rather like the term "coauthoring erotica", myself. It really does come down to a process of playing out a fictional sex scene, except that rather than being between two characters with only the agency of one author behind them, each character has their own player with that player's own agency driving their actions. However, given the personal nature of many people's characters, it's really more autobiographical than this makes it sound. It comes down to a sort of subjunctive autobiography: a way of describing what we would do in such a situation.

Role-play of this sort is a stellar example of the interaction between fantasy and real life, as one's actions in a primarily fantastical space can be tied to the way one feels and acts outside of that space. One notable example surrounds orgasm in sexual role-play, and the idea that if one is planning on orgasm in real life as well as online, they ought to happen at around the same time, thus "lining up" the sensation for both the player and the description of what's happening with the character. I'll be careful to note that this usually is discussed in the negative: due to the refractory period, many find it difficult to so actively consider sex as to continue, thus an awkward idle-out or perhaps excuses leading to ending the session early being seen as an indicator of getting off too soon.

This also plays into the interaction that is going on between the two players, who may strive to reach climax at the same time, consciously or not. This is aluxury of the medium, of course. The shared moment of climax is seen as an ideal. It isn't always as common in physical sexual encounters as it is online, but more on that later.

So how exactly does all of this work? There are obviously countless different styles of RP, and there is hardly one common anatomy to a session. However, there are several common tropes that show up in sexual scenes.

- The **Romantic**: of course, sex and romantic love are often entangled, and this is hardly challenged by the fact that the sexual act happens to be taking place in a (semi-)fictional setting on the Internet. This is of notable importance for couples separated by long distances. It's one way to experience the shared pleasure of sex even when the physical aspect of that is not possible.
- Not everything is so tied to two individuals in a romantic relationship, however. The **Mysterious Stranger** is a trope surrounding one-off encounters between people who don't necessarily know each other, similar to a one-night stand, but often with rather less flirting or drinking than might be involved in one of those offline. The common factor here is that the two individuals may not know much about each other than their interests, and the thus the flirting phase may be abbreviated (or even absent).
- Between these two extremes lies the **Just Between Friends** trope, which involves a relationship between two

or more people who, while they may not necessarily be in a romantic relationship, still participate in sexual role-play with each other. Sex is often part of friendships, but when the sex is light on consequences and heavy on a sense of fun, it's particularly easy to work into many more relationships than one might ordinarily, but again, more on that later.

- The **Sex Scene** is just what it says on the tin. With role-play that lasts longer than a single session, such as those that involve last over the period of weeks involving several characters and participated in by several players, a sex scene can happen and still fit within the overall arc of the plot being enacted. This can be as vaguely defined as a sort of guild or school that generally does things together (again on Tapestries, the St. Mary's School for Wayward Furs is a good example) or as tightly controlled as playing out a plot defined in advance.

Again, these are hardly universal, though they may show up often enough to be seen as common tropes. There are many different variations, including even well-defined events centering around sexual RP such as Kitseve, a fertility festival held on the Tapestries MUCK once a year.

There are a few other commonalities that I've noticed in a lot of sexual role-play that are worth mentioning. For one, most every scene leads to climax, often for both (or all) parties, which is often less-common offline than it is online. This may be due in part to the sharper distinction between what is sexual and what isn't in a text-base role-playing situation than in person.

Additionally, penetration of some sort seems to be more common online, as well, perhaps due to the relative ease of typing about the process as compared to the physical process itself, and perhaps due to it being "more interesting" compared to other forms of sexual interaction.

TinySex, sexual role-playing, has played a formative role for me in my own sexual maturation, leaving behind a sort of coming-of-age story of my own sexual maturation (a *Bildungsroman*, if you will) in the form of logs and memories. I don't think I'm alone, either, in finding sexual satisfaction in the form of writing about it with at least one other person. For many furies, even for many who just grew up with the Internet as their companion as furies are hardly alone in this act, sexuality burgeons easily online for many reasons.

One of these is transgression. It's interesting to note the ways in which we act that align with what we think of as popular culture, and the ways in which we transgress against that. Kink is, in a lot of ways, one of the bigger and more structured ways to do so. It goes beyond just performing sexual acts online, which is perhaps transgressive in its own way (though less so now than it used to be - the decline in use of the word 'cyber' is something of an indicator here). With role-play, consequences are greatly reduced from similar acts taking place offline, and so it acts as a facilitator in a way, allowing greater and wider exploration into interests and kinks that one might not have the chance to do otherwise. Further still, there are things one can do in TS that are simply out of the realm of possibility in real life, relying heavily on the framework that furry provides to guide these plot lines. From something as common-place as canine knots to

acts such as vore, furry helps give these both context (canines have knots, predators eat prey), and structure (we are canines, we are predators or prey).

Another important reason is the concept of consent. I believe that defining consent on a situational basis is one of the biggest parts of leading a sex-positive life. With role-play, though, consent relies heavily on participation. Power dynamics are softened by the fact that not consenting does not necessarily put one in danger; not consenting can simply mean not participating. This isn't to say that there are no power dynamics, that there aren't any abusive relationships due to this reliance on participation as consent. Rather that there is an easy way out of a situation one doesn't want to be in: logging off. One avenue that this helps open up is a safe way of exploring consent and agency through fetishization of the same. Both can be played with safely as part of the plot of the scene.

Of course, it's also still personal interaction on a level that is deeply important for many. There's a lot to be said for shared experience, and thus a lot to be said for the comfort in shared fantasy. Writing a story and expressing one's fantasy in words does cover quite a bit of ground, but it lacks that interaction, and this co-authorship helps to provide that. The solo act of writing doesn't always satisfy that need.

I know I've been waxing rhapsodic about just how neat and awesome typesex is, and I really do enjoy it (or did, at least, it's been a few years since I've been *really* into it), but I can't posit an idea as something worth studying and only look at the good sides. It's not that there's some sort of huge, sinister aspect to RP, of course, but it's worth considering that the being able to

work with fantasy in such a way is a means to having ideal sexual encounters.

The fact of the matter is that sexuality in real life rarely, if ever, includes such scripted perfection. We can't pause and decide what would be the ideal - hottest, most well written, best for furthering the plot - next step offline nearly so easily as we can online. There's a lot to be gained from realism in terms of getting off, what hurts, and all that goes into a sexual encounter. There is certainly a place for sex within a relationship, and it's worth the potential pain of real live physical contact to understand one's partner. The unrealistic understanding of consent in TS is strange, of course. It doesn't apply one hundred percent outside of that context. Still, it's hardly a bad thing to play around online. An outlet is an outlet, and we all need those.

Role-play is most certainly not a furry-only thing, of course. Intentional role-play has been a part of life for most of human existence, I'm sure, and sexuality is a logical extension of that. Even online, it's very much not restricted to furies alone: after all, the word cybersex wouldn't have been this big, scary thing for my parents to warn me about back in the late nineties without there being some type-fucking going on at the time. However, we already have the benefit of interacting through our intentionally constructed avatars in the context of furry. Adding sexuality in as an aspect only serves to further that for a great many people.

Chapter 47

The Importance of Roleplay — Part 2

July 6, 2013

Previously on Love ☐ Sex ☐ Fur...

Okay, so we're hardly a television series here. Last time I wrote, though, I spent nearly two thousand words on just how interesting I think sexual role-play is. Once I started nearing the end of the article, though, I noticed that I really sort of forgot to include more than a few token references to just how role-playing fits in with relationships. Sometimes, my writing suffers from the fact that I get so easily focused on a smaller aspect of a larger issue, and it's hard to step back far enough to see things from a broader point of view without losing the train of thought. Also, given that I finished the article literally fifteen minutes before it was supposed to go live due to a ridiculous power outage, I figured it'd probably be best to leave things as they were and instead dub that article Part 1 and save Part 2,

this article, for an exploration of how TinySex and role-play in general fit into relationships, both romantic and otherwise.

No small amount of ink (or key-presses, for that matter) has been spilled on the topic of how we, as furies, create these avatars for ourselves and use them to interact with each other, often in the most banal of ways. We role-play being advertising agents, get pictures of ourselves running late to work, or write stories about football players in love. Sure, we have our space-ships and magic, but speculative fiction of that sort is hardly solely the realm of furies. We also have our slice of life stories and *bildungsromans*. We role-play full lives as our characters, not just the heroic segments.

Last week, the topic I focused on was primarily that of one of the more banal, yet no less important, aspects of life: sex. I talked about sex primarily in terms of the act itself. I think that the last article suffered particularly from a lack of talk about the relational aspects of sex, as I spent most of my time thinking and writing about psychological aspects such as transgression or mechanical aspects such as orgasm. They're important, sure, but sex is a social act, given that it hardly takes place all by one's lonesome. I think it's well worth taking that step back and looking at the social aspects as well.

There are, I've found some relationships in which role-play Just Works™. That is, even though there are relationships that I've had, friendship or more, in which I've given the occasionally *hug* or *nuzz*, there wasn't any room, need, or desire for much beyond that. However, there were many that were just the opposite. There were relationships that focused almost entirely on role play, and for a variety of reasons. Both types (and every-

thing in between), I feel, are valid. A relationship that consisted entirely of me being a fox person and the other being a different animal person, interacting primarily in those roles, was still a close-knit relationship, one that I felt comfortable calling such even in the romantic sense. Looking into why that's the case is what got me thinking about this in the first place.

Restating that thesis, I don't think it's out of place for me to say that there are relationships that do more than include this context of role-play: they flourish on it. For various reasons, even if the acts involved in the RP within the relationship were possible offline (and we've talked about a few that aren't), the relationship just wouldn't necessarily work the same, if at all, outside of this context.

The opposite is also true. There are people with whom I am good friends, but we only ever just talk online, though we might be close physically or even romantically offline. That's hardly extraordinary, of course: I talk with all of my coworkers online primarily about work, and have at most every job, though we may chat and go drinking outside of that online context. It's as though there's a divide between where role-play will and won't work for us that we pick up on and take into account when interacting, no matter how close we are emotionally.

One aspect that I think is worth reemphasizing is that, although the emotional connection in these role-play heavy relationships may be different, it's not invalid and hardly existent in these role-play. The interactions that I have and have had with others online (as mentioned previously, and worth a caveat again, I'm not as into this sort of thing as I used to be) were often deep, personal connections to another individual or

group of individuals. The countless hours I spent talking to and fooling around with others hardly count as nothing, the others hardly faceless automata reacting solely to what I type.

A lot of that has to do with the idea of spaces, or contexts. Sex online is still sex, but it takes place in a separate context, a separate space from sex in person. As a good example of that, it's been my experience that sex in person usually occupies most or all of one's attention, whereas that's hardly the case with roleplay online. In fact, beyond just potentially having more than one thing going on, one might have more than one scene going on in order to still have most of what one's up to fall into the category of sex. This is something that fits within the pornographic aspect of the act: rather than being solely a participant, you are also watching or reading something, and as with pornography, that needn't take up 100% of one's attention.

The social aspects of sexuality can be seen as a collection of innumerable moving parts. We are our own expert systems, in that regard, with certain tolerances that must be taken into account in order for things to mesh in any given context. Taken this way, having multiple contexts - especially when one of those contexts is notably free and lax on rules - may be of use to some. Much of the previous article was about utilizing such a context in a way that proves beneficial to a great many people on an individual basis, but also it works just as well in a relationship setting.

One example where folks benefit is in differing levels of sexual activity. This stems mostly from the disconnect between sexual acts in RP and sexual acts offline. One side of this is that there isn't necessarily a need for one to be sexually active in real

life for one to be sexually active in character. Whether it's having a low sex drive, or just the inability to currently take part in sexual acts in person (dorms, work, and so on being common reasons), doesn't necessarily preclude one from taking part in intimacy with someone else. The inverse is also true, of course: one can still be sexually active in person despite being in a relationship with someone online, where RP may be common. Not everyone lines up sexually all the time, after all.

Another important example relates to sexual promiscuity, and the way it is perceived in a role-play context as compared to something more grounded in real life. While monogamy and polygamy are complex social topics most definitely worthy of being explored more deeply on their own, it's interesting to note a surprising number of relationships that are more open in an online context than they are in person.

Part of this, I think, is due to the relative safety of TS: the lack of physical contact and the role that consent plays do help to keep everyone safe. Even when one is not currently in a romantic relationship, however, there is little in the way of physical harm that might come from being promiscuous in role-play, and sexual satiation does help keep people healthy mentally, even if one does wind up having to tone down promiscuity when one does wind up in a relationship.

Beyond that, however, the idea of contexts once again comes into play. What it means to have sex in the context of typing out strings of sentences with erotic content at one another can very obviously mean something different from consensual physical sex. That said, one isn't simply alternating roles of narrator in telling some erotic story. One's characters are exten-

sions of oneself, and so the waters are muddied. Some take this to be equivalent to sexual activity offline, while others separate the ideas totally, and there are those who treat it every way in between.

To round out my hendiatriis of examples, a final one is the ways in which basal aspects such as gender and orientation come into play. This is something that I'm not sure is as widespread, but it has figured large in my own experiences, and I find it worth investigating. Both gender identity and sexual orientation can be much more complex and intricate than society often gives them credit. Experience through experimentation help flesh out one's sense of identity and self within a social setting, as they interact quite closely. Gender-play and a safe-space to experiment outside of more simplistic definitions of orientation. JM wrote on [a][s] about this previously, noting the number of members of our subculture who re-evaluate their sexual orientation, and I think this is one potential aspect of it (after all, I came into the fandom as a gay male and who even knows what I am now).

A lot of these seem to boil down to relative levels of "okayness". Being okay with oneself, being okay within a given context, and being okay both physically as well as emotionally and intellectually. The crux of the matter, after all, is that the physical is deemphasized while the mental and emotional are emphasized in role-play such as this. This is part of what goes into a safe space, and that's what's often required for maturation: a place in which one is both challenged without reduced possibility for harm, and an easy way out. It's a place to define the

boundaries of okayness when it comes to things such as relative sexual activity, promiscuity, or countless other aspects of self.

There has been a lot of discussion over the last year about sex-positivity in furry. How sex and the fandom interact is more than just how sexual furries are in general, but how discussion around sex is framed between furries and themselves, and furries and the world at large. After all, this is a big part of why LSF was started in the first place. However, it's my belief that beyond being one of the more interesting aspects of that intersection, role-play is also one of the more sex-positive ones: interests are discussed and expanded on, websites such as f-list are created, and tools such as wixxx are used. There's discourse around the topic, and it's not just that it's relatively positive, it's also expected. A culture has built up within and around this RP context. It's no longer just singular acts.

Chapter 48

Let's Talk About Sex

August 17, 2013

I spend a lot of time burying myself in the fandom, reveling in the connections we build and giving back in the best ways I can manage. I'm not a good artist (just trust me on this - it's best for *everyone* if I don't draw), and my music career stalled after I graduated college: I've not yet found the means to jump-start it. When it comes to fiction, I'm afraid I have more ideas than I have motivation. It's not a good combo, really, as I wind up with (quite literally) notebooks full of ideas with all of two stories to show for it. I have a doofy time-travel story that somehow managed to involve choir music, *sigh*, and a short piece of erotic fiction that involves two foxes and some milkshakes.

I'm not an excellent writer. My prose is loose, and the fact that keeping it that way is the only way I can manage to get anything done does not speak well for improvement down the road. I can pull a mean metonymy, I'm average at alliteration, and if I squint for a while, I'm sure I can squeeze out a metaphor,

but I have no formal training in writing beyond the minimum required to graduate high school, and whatever it took to get my music degree.

What I do have going for me, however, is words. I've got a lot of words.

So: lets sit down and have a little chat about sex. Or - wait, cancel that. Let's have a grand discussion about it

In my delving within the fandom, I have wound up involved in a few projects, and one of those is the delightful, rather fuzzy book club Bookmarfs!. The club is a very open affair, though we've got regular participants in the form of myself, my partner Forneus, a most excellent fox, Peri, TabbieWolf, and the inimitable Lunostophiles. When we somehow managed to boil this month's book down from a choice of <book about sex>, <book about heterosexuality>, and <essays on patriotism>, to <book about sex>, I was a little surprised, though hardly displeased. All three were quite good, and while I do hope we get to *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* and *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* sometime in the future, Mary Roach's *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex* has been a very interesting read, and there's one passage in particular that I'd like to share:

The media's ubiquitous coverage of sex and sex research - as well as the genesis and population explosion of TV, radio, and newspaper sex advisors - have chipped away at the taboos that kept couples from talking openly with each other about the sex they were having. Bit by bit, sex research has unraveled the hows, whys, why-nots, and how-betters of

arousal and orgasm. The more the researchers and the sexperts and the reporters talked about sex, the easier it became for everyone else to. As communication eases and knowledge grows, inhibitions dissolve and confidence takes root.

I think a lot about the ways in which we, as a culture, move forward. JM and I have both written about it over on [adjective][species]; about the ways in which both conformity and transgression, each in their place, help to advance both individuals and society. I think that the two writing platforms of [adjective][species] and LSF embody this nicely, when we get down to it. Sure, there's some mixing - there's quite a bit of transgression on [a][s], and there's bound to be a fair bit of conformity here on LSF! Still, though, our whole point is to move things forward, whether it's through reinforcing the ideas that tacitly pervade the fandom, or by challenging the very ideas that many hold dear.

The previous quote from *Bonk* comes from a section about the ways in which Masters and Johnson changed viewpoints with their publication of *Homosexuality in Perspective* in 1979. The book is admittedly not without its problems - the second half of the book apparently could be read as a tract on curing homosexuality, though I've not read it for myself. The first half of the book, though, was spent dissecting the differences in sexual interaction between homosexual and heterosexual couples, whether they'd been together for years or simply assigned to be together that night by the researchers. Between homosexual couples, Masters and Johnson noted, there was much more

attention to one's partner and much less attention to, to paraphrase Mary Roach, the author of *Bonk*, goals. Rather than focusing on the goal of orgasm, the sexual act shifted on the act of providing pleasure.

As Roach admits in the quote, much has changed in the nearly 35 years since the publication of *Homosexuality in Perspective*. Never mind problems in the *HiP* study, nor even social attitudes towards sexual orientation, the discussion around sex itself, as the author insists, has shifted. We are becoming more open about sexuality (the reasons for which include, not least of which, commercial opportunity), and by virtue of becoming more open in general, we are becoming more open specifically within our relationships. The taboos that dog us through the ages don't stand in the way quite as often as they used to, and are easily knocked down by more knowledge, more discussion, and being more open.

They're not gone completely, however, and that's why, to paraphrase Vi Hart, so long as we construct barriers for ourselves, we always find ways to deconstruct them as well; and we will always construct those barriers.

To that end, I'd like to announce the first of (hopefully) several guides published and distributed freely within the furry fandom: TheLove ☐ Sex ☐ Fur Guide to Safer Sex.

JM and I have been discussing such a thing in various guises for quite a while now, and I've spent the last month or so laying the groundwork for such a project. The idea is simple: to provide a short, accurate guide or guides for distribution within our subculture to accomplish the simple goal of disseminating more information. This is the heart of Mary Roach's point in the quote

above, it's the fact that underpins the very existence of the [adjective][species] projects, and it's the one thing mentioned over and over again whenever an idea such as this is mentioned.

Furry is nothing if not participatory, however, and so here's the twist: all of the guides are open sourced. Not will be, but already are, have been from day one. "Open Source" has almost certainly permeated most aspects of our culture by now, but it's still worth clarifying. Anyone with the will to do so is free to make changes to the guides. They are not, of course, open to vandalism - changes must be approved before they are merged in with the master copy - but they are open to everyone to not only suggest, but to be proactive and make corrections, to add information, and to extend the base of knowledge. We'll get to the how in a bit. First, though, let's get into some goals and planning.

Rather than spend time listing what this is not, let me just explain a little bit of where I'm coming from on this. I'm not a very sexually active person, despite my part in a site such as this. Even between my partners and I, acts that even I would consider sex are decidedly rare, to the point where I would be comfortable with the label "gray-aseuxal" at the moment, in that sex sort of falls into this weird gray area. Labels and identity are always in flux, of course, but I mention this primarily as a preface to the fact that despite that, we make it a point to talk about sex a lot. *A lot*. If we could be said to have a favorite thing to talk about, it's probably sex. It's in these discussions that we've come across the most internal strife in values instilled by parents, society, and even some parts of the furry fandom. Sex, like many topics shrouded in

taboo, also carries a lot of negative weight for people, and my primary interest is that of sex positivity.

Sex positivity is one of those topics almost certainly in need of its own article (or several), but in short, the idea is that sex and the discussion around it should never be a negative experience. That was my tweet-length description, but we asked on Twitter a while back, and got several additional replies: "That each person has the right to express sexuality to their own degree without being made to feel bad about it", and "it means accepting that a complex area of human interaction exists and is full of nuance that requires careful consideration", and "sex positive means treating sex in a mutually joyous, consensual, fun, and funny manner. It's an expression of love, but not the only one by far, nor is it the only physical one" were just a few of the examples.

The primary goals of the first guide are:

- Accurate and up to date information on safer sex, and
- A safe and positive outlook on sex and sexuality.

Beyond that, we aim to make it as inclusive as possible, as well as pertinent within the fandom. It should be interesting, fun, and worthy of discussion, just like the act itself. And so with that, have at it! Read, share, and contribute! It's all available here.

How it works

The guides are hosted, all together, in one git repository on GitHub. A git repository is simply a folder of files that a pro-

gram, called git, knows about. Git is a distributed revision control system: it knows how to track changes made over time (the revision control system part), and it lets anyone work with the entire project at once or even host copies of it (the distributed part). GitHub is a website that hosts these repositories in such a way that anyone can contribute to them. This means that you can grab a copy of the entire set of guides (a process called *forking*), make the changes you want, save those changes back up to GitHub (a process called *pushing*), and then ask us at LSF to consider merging your changes in (a process called a *pull request*). This is, by necessity, a very brief overview, but GitHub not only has some excellent documentation on the process at the top of their help page, but also a client for Windows that helps make the process much, much simpler. If you need any additional help with git, please feel free to ask! You can contact me directly at makyo@adjectivespecies.com.

Once you have made a change and created a pull-request on GitHub, try to get some input on the changes you'd like to make! I'll do my best to review every request that comes my way, but we'd like to have two positive reviews for each pull request to be merged, unless it's something trivial such as fixing spelling or markup. At that point, the branch will be merged into the master branch, and changes will go live soon thereafter on the site. Additionally, once we get print versions of the guides, those changes will be merged and made available wherever the print versions will be distributed. There's more information on the whole process on the repo page on GitHub.

If you don't wish to contribute directly - whether you don't wish to have a safer-sex guide in your list of contributions on

GitHub, or you simply don't want to bother with git - that's also fine! If you have a change you'd like to make, you can simply tell us about it (or send us a diff) by emailing the address above. I'll work to create a branch to represent your work under my own account, and then offer it up for review, anonymously if you so choose. If you don't want to go as far as actually modifying the guide itself, you can also open an issue, which someone else can then resolve. The goal is to make it as easy as possible to manage contributions, and we don't want to leave anyone out! Additionally, you can always help review upcoming changes (here is an example of a proposing changes), which will be announced here and over Twitter. You can do that through email, as well. Our primary needs for those are:

- Making sure the information is accurate (we use the CDC as our benchmark),
- Making sure the information is relevant (the guide should be clear and concise, and hopefully at least a little furry), and
- Making sure the information is presented well (is it furry, does it look good, etc).

There are other ways in which you can contribute, as well - not only will we be having more guides coming up soon (the next planned is on relationships, along with the [a][s] guides for fursuiting and convention attendance), but we'll also need a few pieces of art for each! Finally, you can always help by spreading the word and getting these guides out there. After all (say it with me)...

More information is better!

Chapter 49

Communitas: Liminality, Marginality, and Outsidership

September, 25, 2013

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-belonging 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 furies 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 furies 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.

Chapter 50

Dating and Relationships Inside the Fandom

October 5, 2013

I'm a very big proponent of the idea that, for the most part, furry is simply a small slice of society at large. We have our skews, of course - the gender skew (towards men), the age skew (towards the 15-25 year old age range), as well as some other, minor skews such as general technical aptitude, or even species selection toward canids - but for the most part, we do not think or act so differently from the "rest of the world" that we cannot interface with it. Our chosen home and family may be more comfortable for us, but we do not exist separate from everyone else.

It's not surprising in the least, then, that dating and relationships do form a part of our membership with this subculture. We think about it, we write about it, we join websites, make websites, or write litanies against websites focused on dating,

relationships and love. It's part of life, and so it is also part of the fandom. Given the subtitle of "Love and Sex in the Furry Fandom," it is also part of our repertoire of subjects to write about, and so I think it's high time that we took a moment to explore dating and relationships inside furry.

Much of what got me interested in writing about such things as this is the propensity of furries to center a good portion (if not all) of their social lives within the fandom. This does extend to dating and relationships as well: a casual observation points to the fact that many (though hardly all) furries seek out romantic relationships within furry itself as part of an aim to build a life within the social group that means so much to them.

This isn't surprising, nor even new. It is far from uncommon for individuals to build up lives within the smaller communities of which they're a part. Americans, after all, don't simply have all of the American population available to them as a dating pool: they're restricted by geography, of course, but they also tend to restrict themselves further by interest. Sports fans, hanging out with sports fans, are more likely to date other sports fans, and the same goes for gamers, hiking aficionados, dog lovers, *et cetera, ad infinitum*. That is what helps to build up strength within a subculture: members do not simply enjoy things on their own without communication, but share that enjoyment with others, and grow closer in the process.

In this sense, our membership acts as a sort of attractor in a complex or chaotic system. If we look to furry to form our strongest relationships, and forming strong relationships helps to strengthen furry, then it's likely that furry will be a more likely place to look for those seeking to form relationships. As

with all complex situations, this is not all that's going on behind the scenes, but still a large part of it: a shared interest gives us something in common, and so we form bonds around that shared interest. The sense of community plays a large enough part, however, that we would be doing it a disservice not to recognize it.

So what do we gain from dating within the fandom? Of course, one of the more obvious benefits is a ready-made dating pool. That is, there are a large amount of visible potential partners out there. The visible aspect is particularly notable, and I think that this ties in with our heavy reliance on electronic communication. In person, a sports fan, gamer, hiking aficionado, or dog lover is not necessarily visible as such - it's not tattooed on the front of their face nor written across their back (well, okay, appeal aside). Online, however, one need only compare the names and icons on a furry Twitter feed versus one dedicated to, say, tech. The preponderance of animal face icons or species in names is readily visible. We *do* have our outward signs of membership, and we can often see immediately when we are talking with a member of our subculture.

This is additionally relevant when it comes to learning more about each other. The ability to research our friends and potential partners is an activity that might come off as stalkerish if not for the quick and relatively simple ability to find out more about someone one is interested in via their FurAffinity/Weasyl/InkBunny profile, including even the type of art (or sex, for that matter) that they favorite or content producers that they follow on such sites. This is not to excuse actual stalking, of course, which is still a potential hazard within our sub-

culture, but more on that in a few. The take-away here is that we live our lives publicly by virtue of participating so heavily via the Internet.

Additionally, there is added security in dating within the fandom, as no one necessarily has "that weird partner" that folks talk around rather than about. You know the one. The one that's, for instance, super into animal people on the Internet. We gain security by starting and maintaining relationships that conform to the expectations and visions of our friends and social groups. That is, a relationship within the fandom is not considered non-conformist, and so we gain all the benefits of social conformity - at least, within the fandom - that go along with a socially conforming relationship outside the fandom.

Of course, the most obvious benefit is that of a shared interest. Interests can do a lot to tie a relationship together, and that goes beyond simply agreeing that you like the same thing. Interests give you something to agree and disagree about passionately, give you a framework for your in-jokes, and give you a means of socializing as a couple outside the context of your own relationship, but still within a pertinent context of that interest. We would all be bored if we shared interests in precisely the same way, for example, but we also would not be compatible if we never shared any interests. Something along the lines of membership to a subculture helps provide the perfect balance of the two.

The means by which we select our partners is hardly some universally positive act, however, and there are a few things in particular that myself and others have mentioned as being worthy of keeping an eye out, particularly in online relationships.

The anonymity of the internet does help us in some respects, but it can encourage unwanted attention in the form of stalking and additional privacy concerns. There is, of course a fine line to walk with how much information we provide and how much we hold back, and what we do provide can come back to bite us in the end in the form of unwanted attention.

Beyond unwanted attention, however, is the distance factor, which is a valid concern for many if us, again in the case of online relationships. The reason for the number of these relationships in particular, though, might have something to do with our selection criteria mentioned above. While our potential partner pool is limited by our interests, it's also further limited by location: if we choose to get into a relationship with another furry, then our local dating pool might be very limited indeed. An informal poll at time of writing showed about half of the participants in long-distance relationships, with the notable explanation that it's less of an issue with "planes + internet + some planning". An online relationship might, at that point, seem much more feasible given that that sort of thing vastly expands the pool of potential partners for one.

Another way by in which our limited relationship pool shows is that the aforementioned skews that are evident in the fandom at large show themselves particularly in relationships. The most notable example, obviously, is gender. When I present the data panel at conventions, I often bring this up: we, as a subculture, represent a pretty even distribution of the spectrum from completely heterosexual to homosexual, but given the skew in gender and biological sex, many more individuals wind up in homosexual relationships. With a dating pool con-

sisting of around 80% male furies, it's not really any surprise that relationships are also skewed toward those involving two male participants, even when those participants don't identify as completely homosexual. This obviously furthers the visibility of homosexuality within the fandom, to the point where that appears to be more of a skew than it might actually be. Other skews, such as age and species show up as well, of course, though sex, gender, and orientation are the most readily visible ones.

None of these are evidence of a furry-only style of dating, though taken as a whole, they do say something about our fandom. We date within our subculture, using it as a sort of attractor as many do, and we date online - no small amount of effort is spent on dating online, given the proliferation of social sites, social networks, chat rooms, MUCKs, and so on with a focus on sex and relationships - and the skews evident in our subculture show themselves in our relationships. However, that makes it no less interesting: this is who we are, this is how we interact, and this is how we love each other and relate to each other. If furry is a slice of society at large, that's all well and good, but we are also made up of our individual participants, and, in the end, it is between us where these relationships are formed.

Chapter 51

Play in Furry

September 10, 2014

On a recent work trip to London, I had the privilege of attending a LondonFurs meet, which I have to say was spectacular. There's not really an analog around where I am, though I imagine the meet known only to me as "Chicken" in California might come close. It was big - hovering around 50 or so people - and there were a good percentage of the attendees in suit, which was new to me. In Northern Colorado, we don't have too much in the way of furmeets, and what we do are quiet, intimate affairs with maybe 15 attendees, tops. Suiting happens, but is uncommon, and tends to represent only a small portion of the furies in attendance.

Another interesting thing was the barrier-to-entry in that the meet took place at a city bar, and thus attracted an older crowd, at least of drinking age (though note JM's recent comment that this includes furies 18 years old and older, rather than 21 as it would be in the United States).

As I sipped mediocre cocktails (seriously, how hard is it to make a Pimm's?!) and aggressively pink wines, I noticed a common trend among the furries - notably among the fursuiters: playfulness. Childish, simple playfulness. This, I think, is something of a universal within our fandom: the tendency toward play.

Play, commonly seen as an activity that takes place between children, or between children and a facilitating adult such as a parent, is an important part of development, particularly in the development of a child's psychology. Play itself serves many purposes during a child's intellectual development and helps to provide a strong basis for the growth of the individual. Outdoor play, for instance, helps to strengthen a child's connection to and understanding of the environment around them. Meanwhile, social play can help solidify language within the growing child and lay the foundation for learning as the individual progresses through school (thus why play is seen as an integral part of early education).

Play also helps to solidify social interaction between individuals. Pretend play and other types of social play are formative in the ways in which children interact with each other into adulthood. Additionally, there is a strong emotional component to play. Childhood psychologists and therapists have often used play as a way of interacting with children on an emotional level. In short, play helps to shape the whole of the child's personality.

The play that I witnessed at that LondonFurs meet, the one that struck me with the idea for this article, was simple. Three furries - two in suit, one out of suit - had arrayed themselves in an equilateral triangle and were rolling a swirly-green beach

ball back and forth. Occasionally, the ball would escape the trio, and, with much visible consternation, one of the fursuiters would go scrambling after it and gleefully bring it back to the small circle. Onlookers watched and laughed, some took pictures, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

This type of scene seemed to me to be particularly furry. That is to say, it was notable in how common it was. It's not uncommon to see furries engaging in playful activities, especially in suit - it was one of the first things I did when I got mine. It's a common sight, seeing furries and fursuiters playing around at conventions, almost to the point where it seems out of place seeing a fursuiter not hamming it up and simply striding purposefully toward some goal.

On the surface, this raises quite a few questions. What exactly is the reason for this focus on play within furry. Is it a type of infantilization? That is, are we intentionally acting more childlike in order to feel more childlike ourselves? Or perhaps it's a type of reclaimed innocence. We act like children in order to relive more childlike (and thus perceived as more fun) portions of our lives. Or perhaps it's simply a means of letting down one's "front-stage persona" in the Erving Goffman sense: we're showing who we truly are - playful individuals - without the professional and interpersonal masks that we otherwise keep firmly in place.

With that last bit in mind, it's worth noting that, in adults, play plays a slightly different role than in children. It's associated most often with a strength of character found primarily in humor, teamwork, and creativity. There are various aspects of playfulness that all adults exhibit throughout their lives, and for

various reasons, as mentioned. Playfulness is a healthy thing for adults to experience, as well as children, and there are aspects of it that fit in all of our day-to-day lives. [ref]

I think this is all quite important to furry, and not just due to the prevalence. I think that playfulness and childishness inform furry on a more fundamental level than we honestly give them credit for. I know the common refrain that furry is about heartening back to our Saturday-morning-cartoon childhoods, that fursuiting is something we do for the enjoyment of children, and I believe that truly is the case for some, but I think that frames the whole situation in a much less personal, much more selfless way. At heart, I think the truth is that a good many of us truly are playful. Our childishness isn't something that's immature, as this playfulness even shows up in our more adult creations, but it's something that shows our strength of character. After all, not only are we able to maintain a mask with which we interact with the public and professional world, but we are also able to let that down and interact with each other through true, honest play.

Chapter 52

On Words

September 16, 2015

Three years ago, on September 6th, a friend of mine passed away.

I'd not really had all that much exposure to death before that, if I'm honest. My step-adoptive-grandfather died when I was fairly young, and all I really remember out of that was the funeral, and inheriting a small medal he'd won from Colorado State University, something about soil science and geology. After that, I had dream after dream about what winning that medal must've been like, walking through some grand oaken hall to receive a pewter medal on a velvet pillow. That I later attended CSU, and that CSU had no oaken halls as in my dreams, always left me vaguely disappointed.

Other than that, my brush with mortality was limited to my grandmother, who passed some time later. The unfortunate part of her passing was that, for years before, she had been deep in a mire of dementia that left her a pallid shadow of her for-

mer self. From her, I remember that a lot of our final interactions were beset by confusion, frustration, and tears. “You’re [my mom]’s son, right?” she asked in the airport. She repeated the question seven or eight times, being sure, each time, to comfort herself that the person pushing her wheelchair was someone known to her.

My mom and I had flown out to see her as she got settled into a final stage of her life in Charlotte, North Carolina. My mom flew out to see her one more time before she died, but, after a long talk, it was decided that I would stay home. “I can’t handle it. I can’t be in that role again,” I pleaded, and my mom let me stay with my dad while she flew out of town.

Margaras died in an automobile accident on the base on which he was stationed. We, the group of friends that had congregated on FurryMUCK since long before I’d first appeared on the scene in 2001, learned about this from a close friend of his three years ago today, as I write this on September 12th. The friend slipped quietly into the room, confirmed that Margs had been a regular there, passed along the news through an article, and then slipped just as quietly from the room.

We all sat basically dumbfounded.

The news came the day before I was scheduled to fly to Canada, to Montreal. I had just started my job at Canonical the week before along with another coworker, and the team had decided that the best way to onboard us new folk was to schedule a week of us working together with a few previously defined goals.

My attention was divided that whole week. It was only my second week at work, and yet I felt as though I was dealing with

a death in the family. I think all of us there on FM were going through something similar, to some extent or another. Some rejoiced in memories, some were crushed. I felt torn - Margs had been there as I was growing up. All through high school, through college, and into my first job.

Most of all, I remembered all of the times, upon performing "I've got a gal in Kalamazoo" during my senior year of high school, that I sang to him about "knowing a lynx in Kalamazoo", where he'd lived. I couldn't get that silly song out of my head for days after learning of his passing. He grumbled every time I quoted that to him, too - he was always a grouchy lynx.

He didn't even live in Michigan anymore. Hadn't in years.

I made it through the week okay. I think all of us found our ways to cope, and for me, that was in solidarity. I left myself logged in to FurryMUCK in a terminal on my laptop even as I worked, peeking back every now and then to see little tendrils of normalcy creeping back into the lives of those impacted by the loss. When I went to sleep, I left myself logged in so that I could wake up to a few hours of chatter before I had been disconnected for inactivity.

Me and a few others, some of whom also grew up knowing the grouchy lynx, still remember those days with a sort of clarity that eludes other, seemingly important moments in life. Every year, a few waves of memory wash through my days, carrying along bits of detritus. Memories of my first few days at Canonical, falling in love all over again with people, leaving a screen session running with the MUCK connected to wake up to.

When our lynx friend passed three years ago, I was left wondering what he'd say to me. I think this is a fairly common thought among those who have lost someone close to them. "Would I be making them proud?" "Would they tell me off for the bad decisions that I've made?" "Did they leave this world having a good impression of me?"

If Margaras were alive today, what would he say to me? When he left, I was just on my way out of a bout of self destruction - would he be proud that I had pulled through that, and several others in the intervening years? When he left, I was still figuring out some very basic aspects of myself: my gender identity and the whole open relationship thing - would he understand all of my halting forays into these territories, the backtracking and endless refining? Would that all become part of the story that we'd laugh about after the fact? Would we still laugh about knowing a lynx in Kalamazoo? What words of ours would we remember best?

I'll never know, obviously.

I've been thinking about that a lot, this time around the sun. What words did we share that made it so that I felt so strongly about his passing? We never met in person, so words were about all we had between us, maybe the occasional *hug* or something to go with it, but other than that, we were friends through the letters that showed up on each other's screens.

The more I thought about this, the more I realized that this is very much the norm within furry. I found myself thinking about the sheer number of people that I know primarily, or even only through words. Words that we have the chance to edit, words that we pick carefully. This is the face we present to each other,

more than just a drawing or two of our character. Its relatively rare, in fact, that the image is what we know, more than the words: I can think of only a handful of examples of people that I know primarily through their likeness rather than through their words, and in almost every case, I am totally unknown to them - it's a purely unidirectional relationship.

Our words, though, is how we truly know each other. It's one of those things that sounds stupidly obvious when set down plainly like that, but all the same, I've been spending some time going over my words and thinking, "Who is it that the people around me know? Am I being earnest, am I constructing an artificial personality, or is it a bit of both?"

I know that I've said some stupid things in my life, and there is a part of me that regrets saying them. I've yelled when I shouldn't have, and I've not spoken up enough when I should have. I've wound up in relationships and friendships that weren't very healthy for me or for the other person, and I've left relationships that were truly good for me for reasons I still don't understand to this day. I regret them, yes, but I can't help but ask myself what I would be without them? Would I have matured into someone I would like to be friends with? Would I have matured at all, if I hadn't, at some points in my life, done the wrong thing and actually made that mistake, felt the hot flush of shame?

Brené Brown talks about much of this in her 2012 talk at TED. She describes having a "vulnerability hangover" after admitting to a large audience that she had a breakdown, and goes on to describe the fact that vulnerability is essential to our lives.

I think it's fairly obvious that I agree, given the tone of this article.

More than that, however, Brown talks about how important it is that we have a conversation about shame. "Shame", she says, "is not guilt. Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad.""

There are things that I am ashamed about with my friendship with Margaras. I didn't talk to him enough, foremost. I didn't reach out to him more, and when he was around, I too often was comfortable not engaging more fully. I probably also could've done without making that dumb Kalamazoo joke quite as many times as I did, too.

But again, I have to question what I would be feeling now without that shame. Would my pain have lingered for three years now if I had only perfect interactions with him? Would I miss him so deeply if there were no words left unsaid between us? Would I feel so glad about the time we spent together if I hadn't also gone through rough times while knowing him, and hadn't needed the comfort of a friend?

Now that I know the feeling of loss - how it tastes, how it aches, the weight of it - I think I better understand the way that my own words work, and the importance of shame to me. I have better control over the way that I interact with others, because I've gone through the process of learning how (and how not to). This has changed the way I use words, those most important things within the furry subculture, whether that be on twitter or here through [a][s], talking with friends on Slack or even chatting in person.

I'll still make mistakes, of course, but I'll feel better about them. Hopefully they won't be so deeply stupid, and I'll have a little less to be ashamed of as time goes on. I'll feel guilt about the dumb thing that I did, but maybe a bit less shame about myself. Even so, I'll still have reasons to feel strongly about the ways I interact with people through the words I choose. Maturation's a hell of a task to undertake, but coming out through the other side, it feels much better.

So. To Margaras. To grouchy lynxes. To shame, to mistakes, and to maturity. And hey, until next time,

A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I knew a lynx in Kalamazoo...

Everything's O.K-A-L-A-M-A-Z-O-Oh what a lynx in Kalamazoo-zoo-zoo-zoo-zoo-zoo"

Chapter 53

On Friends

October 7, 2015

Have you ever tried to delineate your past into phases? And not necessarily based on school. I mean, school and work do tend to serve as markers for a lot of our perception of time, and it seems almost habitual that we use them to mark out the periods in our lives. When I grew up, you went to preschool to prepare for kindergarten, which prepared you for elementary school. Fifth grade prepared you for middle school, and eighth grade for high school. Naturally, your senior year of high school prepared you for college, which prepared you for work, which helped you towards retirement, which seemed to be the best bit of all. Four years old, five, eleven, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two, sixty-five.

When I was growing up, it all seemed right and natural. Right up until half way through my fifth-grade year, when I had just turned eleven. My parents had divorced when I was very young, and I'd spent my years up until that point living primar-

ily with my mom. It was decided, though, once I left elementary school, that I would go live with my dad. That threw a wrench into the idyllic progression of years: where my dad lived, elementary school was kindergarten through sixth grade, not fifth, and middle school was replaced with junior high school.

If I were feeling particularly cheeky, I could blame most of this article on the turmoil caused by early recognition that, in River Tam's words, "day" is a vestigial mode of time measurement based on solar cycles, and really this was just all made up to make the paperwork easier. (I don't, however, think that would give me a pass from the fact that I spent seven years in university, rather than four. That's all on me.)

Whatever the reason, I stopped thinking of these seemingly arbitrary points in time as the true demarcation of childhood from adolescence or adolescence from adulthood. Maybe this is something that everyone goes through at some point in their lives, realizing that some things are just creative fictions.

It's not that school didn't have an effect on me. Like many, I suffer from cyclical bouts of depression in varying degrees of severity that, for several years, followed the schedule of school, rather than the amount of light in my days. I'd get strongly depressed around spring break, clear up around the end of school, get a little depressed mid-summer when I'd previously switched from living with my mom to living with my dad, then get extra anxious and depressed around the time that school started. College, with its emphasis on finals and its month-long winter holiday, added an additional kink in the middle of December when hell-week struck.

For a while - a more depressed while - I used these shifts in mood to mark the time. It's difficult, when one is depressed, to think of depression as anything other than a tiresome, inescapable bore. Depression, as Andrew Solomon puts it, isn't the opposite of happiness, it's the opposite of vitality. The end of summer would start to swing around and I'd sigh to myself and think, "Time to batten down the hatches."

Once I got deeper into college and these issues worsened, the seasonal clock shifted to something even shorter. A day, at its shortest, was divided up into an anxiety of the hours: Matins of suicidal ideation, Lauds of self-deprecation, Vespers of procrastination and loathing.

By the time that I started on serious medication for mental health (and not sneakily hiding kava, 5-HTP, and St. John's Wort from my mom - sorry mom), I had all but broken my life down into three segments. There was BA - before anxiety, A - anxiety, and AM - after medication. Or, to take it in a more morbid direction, BSA and ASA - before and after suicide attempt.

Needless to say, I'm less jaded about the life that I lead, these days.

With time, I've gained more strength in the areas of introspection and retrospection. In introspection lies the ability to adequately assess one's state of being, the set and setting around one. I can see that, somewhere in that mire of the A years, I managed to find my way into a relationship, a house, and a pretty neat job. In retrospection lies the ability to track my course through life from where I stand now, even if I couldn't see it at the time. I could see that anxiety was a sort of tool that I leveraged to get me where I am today, though at a high cost.

Naturally, the immediate thing I leapt to with that newly strengthened retrospection is dividing my life up into two eras: BF - before furry, and AF - after furry.

As with gender identity and sexual orientation, furry was one of those things that made a lot of sense in retrospect, what with all those games of pretending to be a mouse or a cat (seriously, that occupied all of elementary school; it's a wonder I held out as long as I did). That said, unlike other aspects of identity, there was a definite date to me finding furry (Yerfl, in late 2000), so it was easier to give it a hard and fast cut-over date.

More and more, as time goes by, I've settled on something both a little more subtle and a lot more fine-grained to mark the passage of time: the flow of various friendships within my life.

The early years, in elementary and middle school, I wound up finding myself in varied friend-groups related primarily to a few vague interests. I was super into drawing for a while, and into Star Wars, and the movie Tremors. Later, I got more into music, and even started composing brief melodies in fourth grade. Middle school saw an increased fascination with the mind and spirituality, and I even snuck a bible into the house to read at one point, after Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha got me thinking about the subject of religion in its own roundabout way.

Through out all of that, I found friends to go along with my interests. Some friends and I shared sketchbooks, while others played with me in the sandbox, making holes in the sand like in Tremors. I talked music with a violinist friend and talked spirituality with a buddhist friend.

This followed me into furry, as well. I talked about They Might Be Giants with Rela, joked about Discordianism with Rela and Louis. I talked about music and math and growing up with Kanu, who later became Melekh, and about poetry with an otter named Mondriaan. I spent countless hours talking about computers with Kanja, and about growing up with countless other teens on FluffMUCK.

These were the friendships of the past that I had formed. They delineate my past into my own small bildungsroman, a coming of age tale told through interactions with furries online, more complete than would one built on the strict litany of school.

Through this time I also formed friendships that endured. I talked about growing up and being grown up with Shanerak, who became Tabernak. Ryan and I spoke about spirituality and food, all the way back from second grade on. I talked about language and Teilhard de Chardin with Rikoshi (well, not just, but we do like us some Jesuit philosophy at times). Danish and I have stuck together in our own way over the years, as have Floid and I, each for our own reasons. Some friendships are built well for time, burning slowly and steadily throughout the years while others have flashed brightly and been all the more intense for the afterimages they leave behind after fading.

I've had friendships that have floundered for a while, and then then returned, as well as friendships that have spring anew as who I have become has changed over the years. It's my own divine office, the liturgy of my life as told through friendship. Hour by hour, I fill my life with prayers of friendship - suppli-

cation, invocation, adoration, meditation, and even extemporaneous rejoicing in those in my life.

I don't mean to simply wax poetic about how much friendship means to me, though it means a lot. I think that this is important to me particularly because I am shown the person I was at the time when the friendship was important to me, often because of the reason for the friendship. As I delved more and more into music, I became friends with more and more people who loved talking about music, which was reenforcement in a way, helping me to keep going along the path of a musician. In other cases, friends became inspiration for what would eventually become a large part of my life, such as John and Josiah, who both got me so deep into programming that I wound up working as a software developer after college.

Welcome to Furry! You probably won't have kids while you're here, but you sure will raise a lot of teenagers.

— Dammit Path (@pathhyena) August 27, 2015

In this sense, furry came at the perfect time for me, as it showed up right as several psychological preferences and aspects of identity were solidifying, leading to some of the longest-lasting friendships that I've formed in life. It was with these animal people that I came into my own, became an individual person and wound up maturing into the fox that I am today. I followed along with others as they figured out their sexuality and came out to their parents, just as I did. I trailed eagerly along behind braver folks than I as they plowed through the territory of gender identity, laying down paths that I could follow. And in so many of these cases, the friends of mine were furries. In fact, although I do have numerous friends outside of

the fandom, those who are furries outnumber those who are not by a vast amount.

Furry is important in this way, and not just to me personally. It goes beyond my own experiences. Furry is a network of friendships, above all. It is made up of individuals sharing something together, learning from each other and leading the way for those who come after. A few friends and I got into furry with enough seriousness early on in high school that we wound up on FluffMUCK, and from there, others led me down various paths into the fandom. I can credit much of my interest in programming to furries, as well as in writing and my tastes in visual art, and I can only hope I'm doing a good job of providing an example in my own small way.

This is how I divvy up my life into meaningful pieces. I think less of how I spent six years at one elementary school and one at the other, and less of how my life was slowly taken over by mental illness until I regained control. I think more of the time I spent on FluffMUCK, the house with Ryan and Shannon, the weeks where I would look forward to Fort Fur Fridays, our local meet, with an intensity that baffled my non-furry partner at the time. I measure the seasons by conventions more often than by mood swings, these days, and it feels pretty good.

It feels good to know that there are folks out there being the best foxes, dragons, and cats that they can be, and having a really great time of it. And it makes me wonder how I've marked the hours of the lives of the people I've known. I don't talk to Rela or Louis or Kanu anymore, but do they ever think back to that gawky fox named Ranna, that high school kid in need of a friend group who found it online with a bunch of other furs?

How much pain have I caused to help mark the time? How much pleasure? How many bored conversations have I been a part of that others occasional think back on and laugh?

It's not a melancholy thought, to know that lives have pain in them, though it is honest. And it's not worth lying about the fact that pain is sometimes caused by others or by yourself, because it very much can be. After all, we are often the source of our greatest pleasures as well. It's just worth knowing that you're someone's springtime, that others can be there for you through winter and summer both. And really, what better way to mark the time than with friends?