Creature comfort: anthropomorphism, sexuality and revitalization in the furry fandom

Matt Morgan

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CREATURE COMFORT: ANTHROPOMORPHISM, SEXUALITY AND REVITALIZATION IN THE FURRY FANDOM.

By
Matthew Morgan

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Submitted to the Faculty of Mississippi State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work

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CREATURE COMFORT: ANTHROPOMORPHISM, SEXUALITY AND REVITALIZATION IN THE FURRY FANDOM.

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This paper attempts to describe and analyze the culture of the furry fandom within the context of anthropologist Anthony Wallace’s model of cultural revitalization movements. This paper argues that the fandom represents a subcultural revitalization movement in which values, identity, and sexuality are transformed through the mechanism of zoomorphic symbolism. Over one-hundred interviewees were interviewed during this study. Interviewees generally expressed an affinity for childhood and a negative perspective on adolescent culture. This paper argues that the transformation of identity expressed by interviewees is based on a synthesis of idealized concepts of childhood culture and reactions to negative self-images developed during adolescence. This revitalization process is most evident in the sexual practices of interviewees. Rather than a conglomeration of fetishes, the sexual practices of the fandom represent an attempt
to redefine individuals’ “mazeways” through the merging of childhood iconography with sexual empowerment and other traits desired by interviewees.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to Stanley Gardener Polson. A philosopher, poet, and friend of adversity, he has been a true friend of mine since our youth. Without his support and example of idealism, I would have abandoned this project a long time ago. I also dedicate this paper to every member of XH, past and present.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Prologue

Pass not beneath this gateway, but abide,
Without, among the cattle of the field,
---- Merlin to Gareth, Gareth and Lynette.

The above passage from Tennyson’s *Idyls of the King* is more than poetry; it is a moral statement. Gareth, a young, idealistic squire, is seeking Camelot in order to be knighted by Arthur. Outside the city gates, he encounters Merlin. Merlin states that Gareth will be bound by vows that no man can keep. Without these vows, however, Gareth is no better than a beast. These vows correspond to a moral code: a worldview and system of values by which Gareth might transcend to a more virtuous state of being.

Let us suppose that Gareth himself has no say in whether or not he subjects himself to the vows of Camelot. Let us suppose that Merlin, instead of issuing a solemn taunt designed to spur Gareth to a heightened level of awareness and zeal, immediately dismisses the young squire due to some involuntary personal flaw or lack of status. In this scenario Gareth does not choose to live as “cattle of the field.” To the contrary, Merlin has reduced him to that state due to Gareth’s perceived inferiority. Gareth, banished to live as a beast, is effectively denied access to the morality, social ties, prestige, and sense
of purpose that are the foundations of Camelot. Is it destined that Gareth will live forever in shame, unable to find any kind of meaningful existence? This paper argues that the answer to this question is no. Gareth does not necessarily live as anathema. This paper argues that for some modern “cattle of the field,” revitalization occurs.

What is a “cultural revitalization movement?” For the purpose of this paper, it is defined as “a deliberate, organized conscious effort by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956:279). This definition is extremely general, but is consistent with the anthropological use of the term. First used to describe attempts to reinvigorate the cultures of indigenous peoples suffering from the negative effects of colonialism, the term has been extended to include the formation of religions, cults, political movements, and even pop culture. The Great Ghost Dance of indigenous plains Indians and other native practices have been analyzed as revitalization movements. Modern, Evangelical Christianity can be understood as a revitalization movement. Even the countercultural movements of the 1960’s can be analyzed as such. This is also true for the Furry fandom, the subject matter of this paper.

A more in-depth description of the Furry fandom will be provided later in the thesis. For the moment, I will define the fandom as an Internet-based revitalization movement in which the goal is to transform sexuality, identity, and values by reinventing the self through animal symbolism, animal costumes, and zoomorphic art. Collectively, individuals who belong to the fandom are called “furries.” Unfamiliar outsiders might simply define them as gay men who have sex in animal suits. This definition is extremely incomplete. First of all, only those who belong to a specific category of furry, that of the “fursuiter” or “furry lifestyler,” wear fur suits and engage in sexual activities while
wearing them. Secondly, though the overwhelming majority of furries are seeking to redefine their identities, and by default sexuality, not every furry engages in sexual activities at conventions. Thirdly, there are some furries who do not engage in homosexual activities at all. Finally, there is a small but growing minority of women in the fandom. One should not neglect to mention these facts. However, fursuiters represent the most extreme elements of a process that underlies the entire fandom. Though all furries engage in revitalization, the extent to which individuals redefine identity, values, and sexuality varies from person to person. There are individuals who engage in limited role-playing or express their values by creating furry art. There are also those who engage in more intense forms of role-playing, not merely illustrating an idealized self-image but acting it out in real life.

These fursuiters are a key component of this paper, though “lifestylers” are not the only element of the fandom included in this analysis. For the most part, I have found that non fur-suiters share many common experiences and values with fursuiters, though they generally share these common values and experiences to a lesser degree. The most visible events at furry conventions are primarily geared towards fursuiters. Many non-fursuiters generally expressed a great degree of envy for fursuiters and their suits. Furry artworks, which often contain a strong sexual element, generally portray characters that are aesthetically and thematically identical to the characters represented by fur suits (this connection will be explained in greater detail later on). It is for these reasons that I regard fursuiters as the “torchbearers” of the fandom. Though numerically they form a minority in the fandom, they are extreme examples of a shared experience, and as a result more blatantly illustrate the process of revitalization. Thus fursuiters comprise a good chunk of
This analysis, though I also took pains to ensure that non-fursuiters were accurately represented.

This paper will argue that fursuiters (and furries in general) are not seeking to satisfy an unconventional fetish, despite the pervasive sexual element of furry culture. Furries are seeking the complete transformation of both the self and the social environment. Sexuality, as a key aspect of human behavior and identity in general, is a central, though not the sole, aspect of this transformation. Furries are creating a culture in which they can be sexually desired, but they are also creating a culture in which they can establish platonic bonds, give and receive status, express their desires creatively, and transcend the isolation and marginalization that have been key features of their previous lives. This experience of marginalization is almost a universal theme in lives of furries, and is the motive for revitalization. This paper will attempt to explain the tribulations and inadequacies of the pre-fandom lives of furries, the benefits of revitalization offered by the fandom, how the fandom functions as a revitalization movement, and the final goals of that revitalization. To do this it is necessary to decode and describe the meaning of furry costume (one of the most prevalent features of the fandom), to create a taxonomy in which different categories of “furriness” can be analyzed and understood, and to briefly discuss the forces underlying the fandom’s history. This paper will attempt to address these topics using a theoretical model derived from the functionalist study of revitalization movements, in order that the reader can understand the deeper meaning of the fandom as it relates to the study of human culture.
General Description

What is a furry? This question is very difficult to answer. To even attempt an answer, one must categorize and define individuals who specifically seek to remain uncategorized and undefined. There can be no accurate, essentialist concept of a furry. To the contrary, to provide any kind of adequate definition, one must take into account the vast variability in this individually-oriented population. I’ve heard a variety of opinions from both outsiders and insiders alike. Those who attack furries (and there are many who prowl the internet seeking to dismantle the subculture, or at least horrify its members) will often attest that furries are merely gay men who have sex with other men in animal suits. However, if one attempts to focus merely on homosexual sexuality, one might hone in on the majority of the furry population, but one will inevitably ignore a heterosexual minority. Furthermore, if one focuses on the wearing of suits, one will ignore an even larger segment. To come up with a working definition, the ethnographer must inevitably engage in a great deal of description. Based on my research, I have devised what I believe to be an extremely broad and inclusive definition. I would define furries as “individuals who seek to transform identity, sexuality, and values by reinventing the self through animal symbolism, animal costumes, and anthropomorphic art.”

An anthropological study of the furry subculture is, I believe, extremely relevant for both the discipline of anthropology and the greater understanding of modern American culture. The subculture is not merely an isolated unit, but is representative of a growing trend among youth in the twenty-first century. There are many identity-based subcultural movements that use the Internet to proselytize to prospective members. For example, if one were to check the Internet briefly, one could find hundreds of websites...
devoted to the creation of non-traditional identities. Many of these websites are part of broader revitalization movements (e.g., furries, so-called “Real Vampires,” Other-kin, etc.) which seek to redefine values and identity for those unwilling or unable to engage fully in conventional culture. Members of these groups generally create a fantastic persona (which furries call a “fursona”), and some not only act out that fursona on the internet, but actually profess belief in it and argue vehemently that they are what they have created (for example, a minority of furries claim to have the soul of an animal, while others claim to be able to shape shift into animal forms). This process of culture creation on the Internet is extremely important to examine, not only due to its sensational nature, but also because of the prevalence of the Internet as the primary means of communication for many people in modern society. The furry subculture is growing extremely quickly: by just typing the word, “furry” into a search engine, one can pull up hundreds of sites. There are several major conventions held every year in the United States, and now there is a large, annual convention held in Europe. Furry artwork has become a valuable commodity to the point that some artists can make a living from it. Furries have been featured (and horribly caricatured) on popular television shows and lampooned in alternative media. The furry fandom is a significant segment of modern, Internet counter-culture.

There is also a paucity of scholarly research regarding the subculture. To my knowledge, there are no etic, academic studies of the furry subculture of any kind. Etic accounts usually take the form of journalism for pop culture papers and websites, and these accounts could hardly be called objective. The size of the subculture (several large-scale conventions are held each year in the United States), its status as a net-based
revitalization movement, and also the general lack of research on the fandom provide a solid argument for the relevance of the results of this study.

**A Brief Description of Fur Suits**

To both outsiders and many furries, the fur suit is the most outstanding feature of the fandom. The suit serves not only as an outlet for role playing and creativity, but also as a disguise, an identifier, and a status symbol within the fandom. Suits vary in regards to species, cost, quality, and purpose, and careful consideration of these variations is necessary to examine the role of the fur suit in the overall subculture.

A very common, almost universal feature of the fur suit is its overall “cartoony” appearance. Most suits are fashioned to look more like school mascots than an amalgam of anatomically correct human and animal parts. These suits are very reminiscent of mascots used at theme parks, and are seemingly innocuous. If one were to walk into Disney World with a fur suit on, one would most likely be greeted with hugs from small children and parents eager to take snapshots. The faces on the suits are almost invariably constructed with large, friendly eyes, exaggerated ears, smiling mouths, and outlandish, almost child-like costumes. Many suits feature pot-bellies and pudgy, almost comical rumps. The suits themselves appear very non-threatening. When weapons or other “frightening” accessories are sometimes added to fur suits, they are almost invariably equally cartoon-like and non-threatening.

A wide variety of animal species is exhibited in fur suits, though there are several species that are much more common than others. The most common type of fur suit is a fox suit. The fox is very popular with furries, and inspires approximately half of the suits
one would see at a convention. The second most popular animal is the wolf, which is generally of the grey variety. The skunk is the third most popular animal, and is generally black and white. Very few animal suits vary from traditional cartoon images in regards to color and anatomical makeup. Though the above animals are by far the most common animals displayed in fur suits and furry art, there are many suits that resemble both wild and domesticated cats, dogs, horses, bears, birds, crocodiles, seals, deer, moose, and even dragons. As symbols of individuality, fur suits are as varied as the individuals who wear them.

Many furries do not have fur suits, often due to the cost and skill required to make one, or due to limited participation in the fandom. The fur suit provides a status marker for furries. Furries who possess and wear suits are generally more immersed in the fandom than those who do not. This is not to say that there are formally-structured castes within the fandom, but the presence of a suit does delineate participation in the community. This will be discussed in greater detail later on in the thesis. Those who do not own suits, but wish to display their participation in the fandom, generally wear a plastic set of ears and a furry tail. Some furries do not wear any costume, but I’ve found that most of them are either just getting introduced to the fandom, or are only intrigued by one or two aspects of it (such as the art). The act of wearing the tail and ears is often viewed as a step towards building and wearing a full fur suit, and many furries who wore this type of costume shared their desire to build a suit with me.

The suit partially serves as a disguise to mask one’s identity. Though many individuals are recognized by their unique suits, which are known to most furries in the community, the suit does provide a certain sense of anonymity in the wearer, even if that
sense is only felt by the individual wearing the suit. This anonymity is reinforced by specific rules pertaining to the wearing of a fur suit. Generally, furries are not supposed to talk while wearing suits. They also are never to take off the head piece while wearing their costume. These rules ensure at least a semblance of anonymity. While inside their costumes, furries act like friendly mascots. They dance, perform stunts, act comically, use expressive body language, and frequently seek hugs, pats on the back or head, and other signs of affection. They can act silly while encased in their costumes and do not have to fear disapproval of their actions, so long as they adhere to the rules of silence and anonymity. One common activity is for an individual to give and receive “scritches,” while in the suit. Furries give each other scritches by tenderly “clawing” one another. The suit provides an individual with an opportunity to get scritches from anyone, regardless of whether or not the other individual is in a fur suit. Some individuals give and receive scritches when neither party is in a fur suit, but this is rare. The suit masks the identity of an individual, and thereby diminishes fear of rejection.

One interesting aesthetic element of the more outlandish fur suits is the variety of dress that furry characters wear. Some fur suits have more mundane clothing attached to them, such as jeans and a t-shirt, while others are more intricate. I have observed a fox in wizard’s clothing, a dog in a baseball uniform, and even a skunk dressed up in the classic green dress of Scarlet from *Gone With the Wind*.

The fur suit also serves as a sexual identifier and a statement about sexual identity, which I will discuss in detail later. Some, though not all, can be worn during sexual activities, and often have removable sections in important areas. Some interviewees labeled these sections “strategically-placed holes.” Some fursuiters (though
by no means the majority) seek arousal by being publicly nude underneath the suit.
Informants shared stories of individuals who walk around in full view of “mundanes,” which is the furry word for non-furries, with only their suits to cover them.

Furry Art

Furry art can be divided into three major categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and some works can fall under all three. The first category is “clean art.” Clean art (an emic term) consists of drawings, paintings, sculptures, comics, and other designs that feature anthropomorphic characters who are not engaged in sexual activity. For example, one piece of clean art I observed was a drawing of a frog in a jet pack (science fiction backdrops are common in furry art). This image had no discernible, sexual overtones. Most clean art is somewhat reminiscent of children’s cartoons, and the artist’s intent is to portray the characters in a generally wholesome manner (even though weapons and cartoon violence may be included). The second category of furry art is “spiritual” art. Artworks in this category emphasize the perceived noble virtues and/or “spiritual” qualities of animals. These works are more likely not to be anthropomorphic at all, but rather are glorifying depictions of anatomically-correct animal species, though some anthropomorphic works fall into this category. These images cater to the minority of furries who have embraced totemic, spiritual beliefs regarding animals, and as a result make up a very small minority of images. Most informants stated that about half of the furry art produced was in the clean category, though these works are not in demand and as a result are less likely to be displayed or purchased. One only has to attend a convention or seek out furry art online to witness the extreme paucity of displays of clean
art. The overwhelming majority of displayed furry art consists of the third category, which I will label “yiffy,” or erotic art. “Yiffy” is an emic term used to describe furry art with sexual themes. Usually meeting the legal requirements of pornography, yiffy art can be subdivided into two styles, “toon” and “realist.” The defining differences between these two categories are stylistic, rather than thematic. The toon style addresses sexual content by using characters and situations that are drawn in a skillful, though deliberately toon-like, fashion. For example, these images might contain a cartoon rabbit, similar to Bugs Bunny in anatomy and composition (except in a few key spots), engaged in a sexual activity with a different “cartoony” character. In realist art, characters are designed to be anatomically correct hybrids of human and animal parts. For example, one comic contained explicit images of a cross between a lion with male, human genitals and anatomy engaging in violent sexual activity with an anthropomorphic female deer (“anthropomorphic” is the emic term used. Thus it will be used in this paper. Zoomorphic is the official, anthropological term for human/animal hybrids). These images are much more sober than the cartoon variety. In some instances, the characters in a work of toon art are engaged in role-specific activities alongside the sexual activities featured in the work. For example, one character will be skateboarding nude, while another is surfing. Of course, a sexual act is usually underway in images like these, despite the most awkward circumstances imaginable. The realist works generally contain very little of this. Animal behaviors such as clawing, biting, howling, and scratching are more visible in realist works. The images that form this category of furry art are also definitely darker. For example, I observed a piece in which one anthropomorphic beast was preying upon another during the act of copulation. The scenery was gloomy and devoid of background
color. There is also more of an attempt at storytelling connected to the images that compose the realist category of furry art. Many images are constructed in comic form compared to the cartoon style, which generally consists of single pictures or rough sketches (though there are exceptions to this). The settings are also stranger and more macabre. Realist works are more likely to have a natural setting (woods, desert, etc.), while toon works are more likely to have a setting that contains a room or street. One seemingly surprising aspect of furry art is the fact that approximately half of the sexual images I’ve encountered during this study are heterosexual in nature, while most furries profess to be homosexual or bisexual. It’s a perplexing issue, and one that I will attempt to explain later on. Heterosexual content (and the female form in particular) is present and pervasive in both the toon and realist styles, regardless of the artists’ orientation or gender.

The Role of the Internet

Outside of the convention, the primary mode of communication between members of this subculture is the Internet. While many different cultural groups, from business enterprises to religious organizations, use the Internet to facilitate communication, furries rely upon it more heavily than the general population, due to the wide dispersal and marginalization of the fandom’s members. Even in a medium-sized city, one might be lucky to come into contact with a couple-dozen others who share interest in the movement. This is changing and the fandom is growing each year, but it is still a relatively small cultural phenomenon.
Many furries display their artwork, biographies, and other information on their websites, which are generally open for public viewing and are not password protected, though due to media attention and harassment passwords are starting to appear on erotic art and discussion sites. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of sites which are accessible to the interested non-furry. As far as explicit material is concerned, most online art galleries consist of full-fledged erotica, and the inquiring reader must be aware of this. Like any other matter of interest to Internet-savvy people, furries also communicate on blog sites and discussion forums. There are also “listservs,” which are large-scale online mailing lists, specifically designed to discuss issues related to the fandom.

Due to the wide, geographic variation in the population, furries are forced to communicate with each other using online, instant messaging programs. A furry cannot merely wander into a bar and find a kindred spirit. The Internet serves as a primary mode of communication that enables the relatively small numbers of the fandom to maintain contact.

There is also the fact that communication via the Internet is more secure than a face-to-face conversation. This of course does not mean that furries are incapable of maintaining friendships in their local communities, nor does it imply that all furries zealously guard the secrecy of their status as participants within the fandom. However, in a society where the stigma against homosexuality in general has not been lifted, it does not require a great deal of perspicacity to understand the factors that might prevent a furry from introducing a mundane into the fandom. Many furries are fearful that their parents will discover their status. Many also fear discrimination, being perceived as
insane, losing friendships, etc. The Internet facilitates discussion about the fandom due to the relative anonymity of online conversations.

Anthropologically speaking, the Internet is still a relatively young mode of communication. The most important contribution of the Internet to the rise of the fandom is instantaneous availability of previously obscure information. Without the Internet, people interested in anthropomorphic art or literature might have to send off to one of the few magazines available in those genres. With the development of the Internet, more and more people are exposed to the fandom due to its widespread, online availability. Whereas individuals with a proclivity toward what we now call the fandom might have never even heard of it in 1990, the rapid and pervasive communication of the Internet has made the counter-culture easy to locate and examine. Anyone with the interest can put up a self-publishing website and is more or less guaranteed that other people will see it.

Conventions

If the Internet provides furries with a means to communicate with each other on a day to day basis, the convention provides furries with a chance to meet face to face. If one were somehow to map the events of the fandom and attempt to discuss it in a historical context, the convention would be the primary benchmark from which all events are referenced. Several prominent conventions are held annually in the United States. The largest annual convention is Anthrocon, which is hosted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Last year Anthrocon had over a thousand participants. There are other large conventions such as the Midwest Furfest, which takes place in Chicago, and Furry Weekend Atlanta.
There is also a European convention called Eurofurence held in Nuremberg, Germany. This is evidence that the fandom is growing in numbers and cross-cultural appeal.

Many furries attempt to attend as many conventions as they can each year. For many the convention is generally the highlight of one’s participation in the fandom. Despite the wide variety in participants and the variations in the people who compose the fandom, the convention provides a mechanism for unity. It is during the convention that a furry establishes bonds with other furries and frees him- or herself from the fear of identification and exposure. I have been to two conventions thus far. I traveled to Chicago to attend the Midwest Furfest and to Memphis to attend the Memphis Fur Meet. I spoke with several convention organizers who were eager to share information about their respective events and furry conventions in general. I was informed that conventions are more similar than different from one another, which was obvious after I had been to two conventions in different geographical areas (I also came across several video sites that contained a great deal of footage from other conventions). Based on these conversations, formal interviews, examination of online furry videos and literature, and my own experiences at conventions, I can generalize somewhat about what happens at a “typical” furry convention.

Most conventions last from three to five days, and there is usually a weekend in the middle. On the first day, a convention usually features a “fur parade.” During the parade, a large number of fursuiters line up in the hotel plaza or convention center and march the length of the area several times, complete with fur suits. During this period individuals take snapshots of costumes and people have a chance to show off their handiwork. The parade introduces and displays the suits to the rest of the convention.
This serves as a kind of ice-breaker. The parade usually lasts about thirty minutes or so, depending on the size of the area. During the parade individuals will wave to the furries, receive hugs, and be entertained by the antics of fursuiters as they march around the venue. After the parade, fursuiters will individually explore the crowd in their suits, waving and entertaining others. Once the introduction has been established a variety of activities ensues during the coming days.

There are several other major features of the convention. Various dances and parties are held in private rooms, specially designated convention areas, and ballrooms. In both of the conventions I attended I was invited to several parties. These parties ranged from simple get-together to raves that featured electronica music, glow-sticks, and individuals dancing in fur suits. As far as the simpler parties are concerned, one would have a hard time discerning between a party at a furry convention and any other gathering of friends in a festive mood. People enjoy themselves by drinking alcohol, watching movies, listening to music, etc. The most obvious feature of the rave parties is the presence of the suits. Of course there are also parties of a sexual nature. My sole source of information on these parties is the interview process.

Another key element of conventions is entertainment. There are actual furry musical groups that perform mostly electronica style music. The group that I witnessed performed in suits. During the concert individuals would dance around in fur suits, twirling strings with glow-sticks attached to them. Very little of the dancing that I witnessed during this concert, or any other convention-sponsored dance, was of an overtly sexual nature.
Aside from live music, the convention also showcases puppet shows. These shows primarily consist of puppets acting out songs that are played over a set of speakers. For example, I watched two dog puppets dressed in cowboy hats and bandanas moving their mouths and dancing to Willie Nelson’s “On the Road Again.”

A near-constant occurrence in a convention is the presence of art trades or expositions. There are almost always several rooms set aside for the display of works of art. Many of the works are available for purchase and some artists will sketch an image at the request of the buyer. When attending a convention, one cannot escape the presence of art (much to the consternation of “mundane” hotel guests, who are not in any way tied to the convention). Of course, one can always find people sitting on steps, at random tables, or in the lounge sketching drawings for each other. There are scheduled events where works of art are showcased and there are also informal displays at just about every corner of the hotel.

There are also discussion panels during the convention. Sometimes more popular artists will discuss their works, practices, or other relevant issues. Sometimes a guest speaker will give advice on how to build a suit or explain one’s status as a member of the fandom to one’s parents, or discuss totemic spiritual beliefs. These subjects are by no means the only topics for discussion at furry panels. One discussion that I observed explored how one could be both a furry and a Christian (which further serves to break down a totally monolithic assessment). This panel seemed to concern itself more with apologetics to other furs, as Christian furries are apparently a very small minority. The discussion panels add to the variety of experiences available and also provide furries with a forum for expressing ideas.
Of course, there are also sex parties. During my first night at a convention, I was walking to my hotel room when I noticed that there were several naked men and one man in a fur suit standing in a hotel room with the door accidentally left open. The experience left me a little shaken, but it was my introduction into another side of the fandom. I was also told by several people where the next sex party would be held just about every day of my stay there. I contained my unease and obviously didn’t take anyone up on the invitations, but I did have a sense of what was going on. I heard of instances of sex toys in the shape of animal parts being used. I also heard of various sexual acts taking place while individuals were wearing fur suits. However, these parties were never held in public, nor did I witness any solicitation on the part of fursuiters. Furthermore, these events were never officially sponsored by the convention staff. I had to seek out this information myself.

On the last night of the convention, some furries hold what they call a “dead dog party.” These dead dog parties provide individuals with their last chance to find a sexual partner, if they haven’t done so already. I heard from several potential informants (which were verified by interviewees) that the dead dog parties are the wildest and most reckless of all parties, in that the individuals present are lowering their standards and looking for just about anyone who will share a sexual experience with them. The dead dog party also features heavier drinking than the other parties. On the night of the dead dog party, one can see small parties of individuals staggering around the halls of the hotel at all hours.
CHAPTER II
THEORY AND METHOD

Theory

In regards to the furry fandom, I believe that a functionalist approach will provide me with the best frame of reference for answering my research questions. The fandom provides support and companionship to members and this function is integral to the transformation of furry identities. It functions as a subculture by satisfying members’ needs for status, belonging, acknowledgement, sexual relationships, and even artistic feedback, and as a result is crucial in the development of identity and values for those who belong to it.

I will further define my functionalist approach by discussing cultural revitalization movements. I believe that while the furry fandom differs greatly from revitalization movements described in the past, the fandom certainly shares many similarities with these movements and deserves to be analyzed in such a manner. In order to explain further my proposed theoretical framework, I will need to define the term, “cultural revitalization movement.”

The term “revitalization movement” was coined by Anthony F.C. Wallace in 1956. The term was initially used to categorize the development of religious revivals among indigenous peoples in the colonial era. These peoples were usually suffering
under colonial oppression or some other form of external stress. Though the circumstances and developments of these movements might seem to have nothing to do with the subject of this study, there are some theoretical similarities that make a comparison useful, even imperative.

Wallace defined a cultural revitalization movement as, “a deliberate, organized conscious effort by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956:279). To meet Wallace’s criteria, the individuals involved in this change have to be conscious of their role in culture creation. This consciousness is present in the furry fandom (furries are self-aware to the point of extreme reflexivity). In the development of online forums, art sites, and conventions we see that furries are also organized, which is another aspect of Wallace’s definition. I will later examine how the furry fandom is a deliberate attempt to escape the negative self-images associated with the past. This furthers our understanding as a revitalization movement. These factors separate revitalization movements from mere culture change. Wallace acknowledges that all cultures change. However, change itself does not constitute a revitalization movement. In a cultural revitalization movement, the individuals who constitute a culture are actively engaged in the process of change, in an attempt to create a new synthesis that better functions to meet certain needs.

Wallace uses the “organismic” analogy to describe cultures. He describes culture as a physical organism. Just as the human body requires various parts to work together to ensure the health of a whole person, a society requires different individuals, institutions, beliefs, etc. to work together to minimize stress on both individuals and society. He argues that cultures should be viewed holistically in regards to their various parts, and
that every aspect of a culture works to reduce stress on the overall whole. The analogy ends, however, in regards to the nature of a society’s parts. Unlike the physical body, a human society depends on the existence of interchangeable, relatively autonomous parts. Whereas the organs of the body receive instructions from the central nervous system, human societies do not possess such an extreme degree of centralization; thus, it is necessary for each individual to become assimilated into the larger societal whole relatively autonomously.

In order to be part of a society, an individual must first possess an idea of him or herself and also an idea of the society the individual belongs to. Without a mental image of the self and society, an individual will have no notions of how to interact with other people and minimize stress on him- or herself, and ultimately the whole. Wallace calls this mental image the “mazeway.” He writes,

This mental image I have called the “mazeway,” since as a model of the cell-body-personality-nature-culture-society system or field, organized by the individual’s own experience, it includes both perceptions of the maze of physical objects of the environment (internal and external, human and nonhuman) and also of the ways in which this maze can be manipulated by the self and others in order to minimize stress. The mazeway is nature, society, culture, personality, and body image, as seen by one person (Wallace 1956:266).

When an individual’s mazeway can no longer be counted on to alleviate stress, an individual must either accept the current level of stress or alter his or her mazeway. The mazeway is altered as a whole and, if the social system it supports is altered to reflect the changing mazeway, then, according to Wallace, the process of revitalization takes place. A group of human beings purposefully altering mazeways in communion with one another in order to achieve a common end is described as a “revitalization movement.”
Wallace uses the term to describe developments of indigenous peoples reacting to colonial oppression or other forms of stress. The Great Ghost Dance of the late 19th century Sioux, for example, provides us with a specific revitalization movement. According to Wallace, the religion of the ghost dance was an attempt to overcome stress and pull native cultures from the brink of extinction by revitalizing native religious zeal (Wallace: 264). Wallace also uses Christianity and Islam as examples of revitalization movements. According to this perspective, some ancient Hebrews suffering under Roman occupation redefined their mazeways using religion in order to revive a threatened culture (Wallace: 267).

According to Wallace (1956), each revitalization movement, regardless of location, era, or culture, will if successful develop through five distinct phases. The first phase is called, “steady state.” During this phase the conventional means for satisfying most needs have generally been successful for individuals in a society. For virtually all furries, this period is analogous to childhood. During the second phase, which Wallace calls, “the period of increased individual stress,” a group of individuals cannot generally reduce stress using conventional means. This inability to reduce stress can be due to military defeat, political domination, or any other external factor that hinders individuals in their attempts to satisfy needs conventionally. This corresponds to the adolescent experiences of interviewees, which were nearly universally regarded as semi “dark ages.” The third phase is, “the period of cultural distortion,” in which recognition of the failures of the current mazeway to reduce stress combines with apprehension in regard to change and either increases or maintains the level of stress on a society. In the context of our
topic, we can understand this period of cultural distortion as the period in which interviewees were sexually mature yet still maintained childhood interests.

The fourth phase is called, “revitalization.” The revitalization phase has several sub-phases of its own. The first sub-phase is called, “mazeway reformulation,” in which a prophet figure or other leader creates a new, internally consistent mazeway in an attempt to revive a society. According to Wallace, the new mazeway generally consists of some aspects of the old mazeway, though they are fused into an entirely new one. For our purposes, we can identify three “prophetic forces” which were ultimately synthesized to produce the fandom. These forces will be discussed in further detail in the history section of the thesis. Furthermore, we can identify previous aspects of the “old” mazeway, such as childhood cartoons and veneration of childhood in general, as components of the new, sexualized mazeway of furries. The second sub-phase is called the “communication” sub-phase, in which the leader or prophet’s mazeway is transmitted to other members of society. We already discussed the vital role of the internet in diffusing furry culture. The third sub-phase is called the “organization” sub-phase, during which followers are gathered and organized. This phase is evidenced by the online consolidation of furries and the organization of conventions. The next sub-phase is called the “adaptation” sub-phase, in which the life of the movement is transformed as it adapts to external resistance. This is the current phase of revitalization experienced by the fandom. A major “doctrinal” dispute arose in the late 1990’s which would contest the heart and soul of the furry community. This dispute was in part a reaction against the external opposition which was (and still is) bearing down on the fandom. There are several prominent anti-furry websites, such as Somethingawful.com, that continually attack the fandom and furries
have had to adapt to these threats. The next sub-phase is called, “cultural transformation.” During this sub-phase the movement constitutes at least a sizeable portion of a society’s population, and exerts considerable influence over the overall society. I’d wager (as would most rational people) that the furry fandom never reaches this stage of revitalization, though it might be able to function eventually as a self-contained subculture. The next sub-phase is referred to as “routinization.” During this sub-phase the new movement is accepted as at least part of the society in question and regularly contributes to stress reduction. The final sub-phase is a return to steady state conditions, in which the movement becomes a fixed part of life for individuals in society (Wallace 1956: 266-275).

Wallace also describes three different categories of cultural revitalization movements. The three categories are revivalist movements (such as Confucianism or the Great Ghost Dance) that seek a return to a traditional way of life, importation movements (which seek to introduce foreign ideas, such as “cargo cults,” in which beliefs about foreign ideas such as Christianity and western economics are infused into indigenous religions), and utopian movements (movements that seek to establish a non-native, non-foreign ideal way of life). This study will be concerned primarily with the third type of movement. We will later examine how the furry fandom functions to create idyllic self-images and new relationships. It is neither totally based on foreign ideas, nor is it based on traditional values.

Though the framework of cultural revitalization movements has mainly been implemented to examine indigenous peoples under severe stress, the structure Wallace describes can be used to reference less dramatic cultural developments. I am in no way
comparing the conditions of the subject matter at hand to the conditions of indigenous peoples reacting against virtual genocide, nor am I describing a religious movement (most revitalization movements have historically been considered to be religious in nature). I am, however, interested in a group of people who are making “a deliberate, organized conscious effort to create a more satisfying culture.” There are aspects of the process described by Wallace which apply to the furry fandom.

The members of the furry fandom are making a concerted, conscious effort to redefine identity, values, and sexuality, and thus qualify as a “revitalization movement,” or at least a microcosm of one. As a result, I feel implementing this framework is justified. Of course, after acknowledging this it becomes necessary to attempt to understand changes in the mazeways of the individuals involved, and to identify what particular stresses these individuals are under. Once the stresses have been identified, and the unfulfilled needs documented, I can then show how and why aspects of furry identity and culture help to fulfill individual needs.

It’s also necessary to state that I am not the first student of culture to frame subcultural movements within a revitalization context. Others have used Wallace’s model or some variant of it to analyze subcultural revitalization. For example, anthropologist Bryan Rill (2006) has described how rave-culture functions as a revitalization movement. Raves are features of furry conventions, so this analysis is extremely relevant for our purposes. Rill describes the symbolic functions and transformations expressed in the rave. He also references the work of anthropologist Victor Turner. Rill states, “In Turner's terms, rave acts as a revitalization movement, wherein participants immerse themselves in a TAZ and return to structure feeling liberated and refreshed” (Rill 2006: 25).
657). According to Rill, raves serve a therapeutic function through which individuals transform themselves and their surroundings.

In *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America 1607-1977* (1978), William McLoughlin describes the revitalization movements that underlie the “Great Awakenings” in American religious history. In this book McLoughlin also includes the so-called “Hippie” movement as an element of another awakening in American consciousness. Thus through McLoughlin’s work we find an analysis of seemingly non-religious cultural development analyzed in the context of revitalization. In *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America 1607-1977*, the foreword by Marty Martin serves to summarize the inclusive nature of McLoughlin’s work. Martin writes, “In the present essay he moves more boldly than anyone I have yet read to extend the study of American awakening into the culture-wide phenomena called “Revitalization Movements” (Martin 1978: IX).

Through extensive interviews, I’ve developed the general impression that most individuals within the furry fandom have suffered from marginalization due to a variety of factors, such as an inability to comfortably interact with others, sometimes to the point that they see the entire external world as anathema. I also have developed the impression that participation in the fandom helps alleviate these problems, and that the furry identity is nothing less than an attempted revolution in regards to self-reinvention and thus cultural revitalization (or at the very least “subcultural revitalization”).

Of course, the fandom represents this process on a smaller scale than many previous revitalization movements. Modern, post-industrial society is extremely grand in scale. Whereas previous revitalization movements have been concerned with large-scale
change, the diversity and vastness of modern society and the ability of individuals to live highly isolated and detached lives have produced a massive conglomeration of subcultures, rather than a unified cultural body. These subcultures are also capable of revitalization, though it might be limited in scope. Rather than seeking renewal through politics or economics, furries have attempted to organize and revitalize aspects of culture that are particularly important to them, primarily sexual prowess, social status, and other components of identity.

Other Related Literature

Discussing relevant literature related to the fandom is difficult. Though the fandom is quickly becoming a feature of American Internet counter-culture, I have been able to find no etic, anthropological works that discuss the particular movement. Due to the fandom’s growth, however, there may be works that exist but are currently unavailable to the general public. However, there are a great number of scholarly articles and books that discuss cultural features similar to some of those present in the fandom. It is incumbent upon us to examine literature that discusses these particular cultures, and attempt to compare that data with the data obtained during the course of this study, since I cannot locate an actual etic, qualitative study that can corroborate or contradict my findings. Many of the subjects of these studies covered in the literature review seem to share features of revitalization movements. These studies, along with the works mentioned in the last section of the thesis, will surely aid me in drawing comparisons.

During the course of my search for other relevant literature, I stumbled across a book entitled, *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male*
Subculture (Les Wright: 1997). This pivotal work contains both etic and emic accounts of the Bear subculture, which seems to be related in some ways to the fandom, though there are striking differences between the two.

Bears, like furries, cannot be imbued with a monolithic definition. To the contrary, there is a wide array of types, sub-types, and even sub-sub types. The subculture consists of diverse groups of individuals who construct identities based upon differing attributes. Les Wright, the compiler and editor of the work, notes that there are fundamental differences in belief as to what a Bear is:

What is a bear? Among the natives there is much disputation. For some it is an attitude (or better, a lack of “attitude”), for some it is an image, a gay sexual icon of desirability. For some it is parts of both, for some the absolute refusal to submit to categorization is the essence of being a bear (Wright 1997:2).

Though any generalization about bears is bound to be flawed, an attempt to list and describe all of these types and sub-types would consume this paper, and a generalization about bears is necessary for making comparisons between bears and furries. For the purposes of this research, bears should be thought of as gay men who reject traditionally gay standards of beauty, behavior, and/or attitude, and also idealize new standards of beauty, behavior, and belief by referring to themselves as “bears.” Bears are more likely to be overweight, bearded, and hairy when compared to mainstream gays (a trait shared with many homosexual and heterosexual male furries). The idealization of the bear represents a rebellion in the gay community regarding aesthetics and lifestyles. Bears are engaged in the same process described in Wallace’s model. Based on these readings, however, bears consciously see themselves as a sub-movement of the overall gay counter-culture, while homosexual or bisexual furries are detached and largely
hostile to notions of the fandom as a gay movement. More will be discussed about this later.

There are striking similarities between bears and furries. I believe that furries are engaged in a similar, “ongoing narrative constructing of self” as part of revitalization (Wright 1997:6), similar to bears in that the sexual values, values concerning beauty, and ideas about power and status are reconstructed in the form of fursonas, suits, works of art, sexual relationships, and friendships within the fandom. Bears idealize the “husky,” hairy man, while many furries idealize animalistic representations and alter-egos, and also make statements about identity by creating characters, works of art, and wearing suits. Many furries play games and create personas in which they escape from their current realities, adopt values, traits, and beliefs from those games and personas, and then construct their own narratives of self-image using what they have adopted. Just as the image of a naked, hairy, husky man is a staple of beauty to the bear, the image of a naked, anthropomorphic creature is a centerpiece of furry sexuality. In both instances the “superficial” requirements of the larger society are disregarded in favor of created standards. The furry may be shunned by conventional society due to his or her obesity, unattractiveness, “social awkwardness,” lack of physical fitness, sexual orientation, etc., but by entering into the fandom, a furry can reasonably expect physical intimacy, friendship, status, and validation. The furry may exaggerate about martial arts prowess, status, etc., but those exaggerations will be given credence by other furries, who may provide physical intimacy and social acknowledgement as a result. Furries seem to validate each other’s constructed narratives, providing support for many individuals who would otherwise be deficient in some way in the larger society. The notion of rebellion
against norms is prevalent in both etic and emic accounts of bears, and I believe that it is also prevalent in the fandom. Michael S. Ramsey, a contributor to the readings compiled by Wright, writes:

Clearly, qualities such as body fur, bears, masculinity, and larger frames are not typically associated with the gay mainstream, and to a large degree, are still shunned by that majority. In part, this outward rejection galvanized many gay men, causing them to form a new group consisting of men who were both appealing to and accepting of them (Ramsey 1997:53).

Another similarity between bears and furries is the prevalent use of the Internet to disseminate culture. Wright describes “Cybearspace,” which can be understood to be the summation of bear life on the Internet. He writes:

Direct electronic communications over the internet developed and proliferated during the 1980s and 1990s. Word-of-mouth knowledge of bears spread very rapidly across the Internet. The preponderance of bears online or in computer fields is traceable back, in part, to this. One of the most often used private or personal uses of the Internet, regardless of sexual orientation, is for communications of a sexual nature (Wright 1997:32).

Of course, the comparison of bears to furries demands that the anthropologist ask a particular question. If bears are revolting against gay standards of beauty, attitude, and behavior, what are furries revolting against? What narratives are being rejected? What is the frame of reference that the development of a furry identity opposes? Interview data evidences the idea that the common foe of the vast majority of furries is their own negative self-images, which were derived and painfully reinforced during adolescence. An individual’s social unease, interest in fantasy, poor appearance, or lack of athletic ability has much more to do with that individual’s adoption of the furry persona than sexual preference. More will be discussed about this later.
There has not been a great deal of literature written on one of the most important aspects of the fandom, the existence of role-playing games and their effects on individuals who play them. A role-playing game, or RPG, can be a video game (e.g. the *Final Fantasy* series), an activity in a chat room (such as the various examples of furry role-playing on IRC (Internet Relay Chat), or a tabletop game (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*). RPGs are a dominant feature in the fandom, and as a result, must be discussed. I will later discuss the role of video games in sustaining childhood interests in cartoons during the turbulence of adolescence, and it is incumbent upon this study to examine fantasy as transmitted through video games.

I have been able to locate a few studies concerned with fantasy gaming and its various facets. One article, “When Spectators Become Performers: Contemporary Performance Entertainments Meet the Needs of an “Unsettled” Audience,” by Kurt Lancaster (1997), discusses the effects of engaging in role-playing on personality, and vice-versa. Lancaster writes:

This stimulation of the imagination transforms players into something other than their normal selves, for a time. This fact explains why people have a desire to play role-playing games. Further, players feel as if they can accomplish heroic feats— and within the performance frame of the game they do (Lancaster 1997:6).

This analysis of role-playing as a form of escapism concurs with what I have observed in the fandom, though it is more limited in regards to effects on individuals’ respective worldviews. Lancaster continues:

For example, a photocopier technician talked about being “beset by customers complaining that their machines don’t work. I have to absorb it all,” he laments. But in a game he is transformed [into a knight]: “You become the hero you’ve always wanted to be,” he remarked. Furthermore, a computer programmer said, that as a player, “You can explore parts of
your personality you’re not able to express in your daily life” (Lancaster 1997:6).

When one takes into account the fact that individuals who play role-playing games may be significantly more introverted than the general population (Douse 1993), it provides further evidence for the role of RPGs as forms of escapism from undesirable, boring, or “mundane” realities, at least in regards to furries. Often introverted, isolated, and lonely, furries can turn to online furry RPG forums, or MUCKS (Multi-User Created Kingdoms) to depart from their surroundings and take refuge in fantasy. In a study conducted by sociologist Gary Fine and described in an interview of Fine by Dayan (1986), personality archetypes prevalent in gaming circles are strikingly similar to those I have observed in some furries. Also, there is a patently sexual element to gaming. Dayan writes:

> When women are present, either as spectators or more exceptionally as partners, male players feel inhibited and embarrassed. This embarrassment, Fine explains, is related to the attitudes displayed during the games. In a caricature of macho behavior, the women mentioned are routinely assaulted, abused, and raped. Players organize their characters into raiding parties largely devoted to collective molestation. Female figures are tirelessly submitted to sexual mistreatment, and one has the feeling the FRP gatherings on Friday evenings are in some way substitutes for more active sexual pursuits, a feeling confirmed by the fact that attendance tends to stop when players get married or start a liaison (Dayan 1986: 1219-1228).

Of course it would be premature and naive to assume that the above portrayal represents all gamers. Having played fantasy games as a teenager I was not exposed to this sort of gaming, though I was certainly aware of it. The fact that gamers tend to withdraw from the game upon obtaining a real-world relationship is evidence of the game serving an escapist role.
In addition to scholarly discussions of various aspects of culture that seem to coincide with the fandom, there is a vast body of emic literature to explore. Furries are prolific artists, and it seems that many have a zeal for writing which complements their affinity toward artistic endeavors. There are hundreds of essays and articles on-line, and these sources provide an abundance of insight into the fandom. These emic sources greatly aided me (along with the Les Wright book) in shaping my research questions and theoretical perspective regarding this study. Furries voice their fears, hopes, controversies, opinions, and desires in these sources, and a broad examination of these sources will serve to ensure the status of my thesis as a polyphonic text. There are essays regarding totemism. There is also the issue of zoophilia, and to what extent it is present in the fandom (it was not prevalent among interviewees, though a handful stated that they had engaged in it). There are essays concerning controversy over the definition of the subculture and the future of the fandom. I have voraciously read these emic works in order to better understand the perspectives of subjects, and certainly do not believe that these emic works are without value in explaining the fandom.

Research Methods

My analysis revolves around the formation of identity. I wanted to examine how the furry subculture functions with regard to the mazeways of individual members. I also wanted to examine how members help contribute to the overall transformation of the subculture. To better understand this process, I wanted to prove or disprove a very general hypothesis. Basically, my goal was to answer the question, “Does participation in the fandom provide most members with a revitalized sense of identity, and if so, how and
why?” I examined the “mazeways” of furries as thoroughly as possible, in the hopes of identifying changes and finding evidence of or discarding notions of cultural revitalization. To prove or disprove my general hypothesis, I conducted open-ended interviews revolving around several subtopics. The questions sets were centered on these subtopics and later analyzed to support or disprove the original hypothesis.

After receiving interview data, I coded it in regard to several different topics. After noticing obvious patterns in the interview data, I created one category of data in which attitudes towards childhood were filed, one in which adolescence was the central theme, and one in which adult life was the focus. I created seven massive folders containing furry attitudes toward sex, fursonas, fur suits, conventions, background information, modes of furrieness, and art. The saturation point was reached early on in the study, and I was able to discern several key patterns and form solid, general conclusions.

My first subtopic/objective was to provide a brief history of the fandom, from its roots in sci-fi/fantasy art and role-playing to its development as a life-changing subculture. In order to achieve this objective I conducted several interviews with two longtime furries, as well as with individuals who left the fandom due to the introduction of heightened sexuality during the 1990’s. There are several online emic documents discussed in the literature review that helped me gain perspective on the development of the fandom, though all but one couldn’t provide me with very many actual facts. One document that did aid me, Fred Patten’s (date) “A Chronology of the Furry Fandom,” provided me with written verification of interviewees’ statements.

My second subtopic/objective was to decode and interpret the meanings of furry costumes. As described earlier, there are gestures specific to the wearing of these
costumes, and costumes contain implied sexual statements about the wearer’s amicability towards “furry” sex. Given this, it was necessary to examine the possible meanings of the animals represented in the suits, and how these animals correspond to the messages the wearer is intending to send. Furthermore, the gestures (“scratches,” for example) send messages themselves. I will attempt to achieve the third objective by the methods described above (which will be described in further detail later in the paper). I interviewed subjects about why they chose and created particular characters, why the aesthetic features on their costumes are present, and how certain gestures make them feel and what these gestures imply about the gesturer.

My third subtopic/objective was to create an emic taxonomy in regards to participation in the subculture. I wanted to describe different categories of “furriness,” different behaviors relevant to these categories, and how furries categorize each other. My primary method of research in regard to creating this taxonomy, like that of the other objectives, was the open-ended interview. The fourth subtopic I wanted to explore was that of “fursonas.” I wanted to learn about the biographical sketches, histories, attributes, and traits of particular characters, in order to gain an understanding of the value systems of furries themselves. Furthermore, I wanted to test the hypothesis that there is a correlation between how individual furries see themselves and how they see their fursonas. Open-ended interviews were used to explore this topic and data were coded according to species, sexual activity and preference, etc.

As stated above, I conducted a large number of interviews. I did not experience any difficulties in obtaining the participation of subjects. Furries are generally extremely eager to share their experiences and beliefs with others, and I was immediately swamped
by interviewees, though this may not be the case today—some more recent interviewees have reported that harassment by anti-furry groups has created a more closed subculture.

Though the interviews were structured around a specific framework, I mainly asked open-ended questions, thereby allowing the subject complete freedom of expression. Subjects had the opportunity to interject their own ideas and beliefs into the interview in a more relaxed fashion. Furries were generally eager to talk, and that greatly aided the entire process. When I interviewed Pentecostal church-goers for an ethnographic methods project, I found that by asking open-ended questions I freed subjects from the impetus to please the questioner, and as a result gained additional data that was later found to contain patterns of belief concerning matters that I had not even thought about.

The primary medium I employed to interview subjects was the Internet. I specifically wanted to use person-to-person online messaging programs to talk openly and at length with the subjects. There are several reasons for this. The primary reason I wanted to use these programs is that the vast majority of internal communication within the fandom is conducted over them. Furries spend a great deal of time on the Internet, and I reasoned that they would feel more comfortable discussing intimate matters in private chat rooms versus in-person or over the phone. The need to seek the approval of the interviewer was reduced because subjects were not in face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact and could hide behind a pseudonym and a computer screen. The fact that the development of the Internet is intimately tied with the growth of the fandom is another reason for conducting the interviews online. Attempting to interview a sufficient number of subjects in person or over the phone would have been impossible due to the vast
geographical dispersal of subjects. There was no prominent local population of furries. Without the Internet the furry would not have the medium to share with those who have similar interests or desires. The social structure within the fandom is based to a certain extent around the existence of the Internet, due to this fact. The same limitations that furries deal with in finding companions also hinder research in regards to face-to-face interviews. An unintended benefit of conducting interviews online was the simplification of the transcription process (simply copying and pasting text into a word file and then removing screen names completed the transcription process). Interviewees were assigned a number when data was recorded to ensure their anonymity.

It was also necessary to learn the implied meanings behind furry terminology. James Spradley writes, “The ethnographer working with people in our complex society must recognize the existence of subtle but important language differences” (Spradley 1979:191). One example of this is the word “furvert.” This word is used to describe furries with interest in the sexual elements of the fandom. It can be used both negatively and positively, even affectionately; however, it also can describe an individual who is shunned by the community. Without asking “verification” questions, the ethnographer could get confused and wrongly assume that the interviewee was negatively describing an individual by using that term. In regards to choosing informants, one of my primary concerns was the representative nature of the populations I was observing and interviewing. According to Dewalt and Dewalt (2002:105), “One of the early goals of fieldwork should be to understand the kinds and sources of diversity within a setting or group.” This is paramount in regards to a study of the furry subculture, and I made a deliberate effort to observe and interview non-fur suiters, fursuiters, and individuals
belonging to other minority subgroups (such as baby furs, etc., which will be discussed in detail later on).

As for the tone of the interviews, I wanted them to seem extremely informal, friendly, and congenial. James Spradley writes, “It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (Spradley 1979:581). Furries are for the most part extremely friendly, and I’ve had no problem maintaining comfortable communication with them.

The specific types of questions asked revolved around the hypothesis and subtopics described above. I asked descriptive questions to gain a broad sense of particular aspects of the research questions, structural questions to understand specific “domains,” i.e., “How informants have organized their knowledge” (Spradley 1979: 149), and contrast questions to understand how informants discern between emic categories.

With all that said, twenty-seven fursuiters were interviewed. Most of these individuals were interviewed more than once (11 were interviewed more than four times). I also interviewed twenty-seven non fur-suiters who all had attended at least one convention (for good measure). Many of these individuals were also interviewed multiple times. There were also over fifty individuals who voluntarily shared information with me online and through other informants. All in all, more than 100 people have greatly assisted me with this project, and their bravery and cooperative spirit is greatly appreciated.

Interviews were initially centered on individuals I met at two conventions. While trying to keep a low profile I discreetly established a rapport with several individuals I
immediately identified as enjoying some degree of popularity in the fandom. I included both fursuiters and non-fursuiters in my initial attempts at finding informants, and these conventions provided me with dozens of potential interviewees. This face-to-face contact was necessary to establish the credibility and age of potential interviewees. I studiously avoided interviewing minors as a result, and it was through these initial interviewees that I gained a broad introduction into the culture of the fandom.

These interviewees were extremely friendly, though they were perhaps a little weary of my presence at first, and rightly so, considering the sufferings many furries have endured at the hands of journalists and others. Once interviews were conducted with these individuals, they began to volunteer to introduce me to other furries, whom I also interviewed. My conditions for interviewing someone were that the potential interviewee was twenty years old or older, and that the individual had attended at least one convention. Once I had interviewed twenty or so fursuiters I realized I had reached the saturation point in regards to several common themes, and I decided to interview twenty-seven fursuiters just to make sure. After I had succeeded in reaching this number, I decided to balance the sample by interviewing several more non-fursuiters so that twenty-seven non-fursuiters would also be represented.

After these interviews I abandoned my formal interview structure. I had learned to identify key patterns in interviews and how to make the interviews more appealing to subjects. Furries were still messaging me of their own volition, and I decided to keep up interviews with a more informal structure, in the hopes that by just “letting them talk” I might pick up on themes I didn’t address in the formal interviews. The themes present in formal interviews were still present in informal interviews, though I did gain some more
insights into the fandom (such as criticism or support for Uncle Kage, a leader of one of the largest conventions and a critic of furries’ participation in media events).

I conducted content analysis on interview data in order to verify my intuitive “hunch” regarding the saturation point. I began to pour over every interview with an eye toward childhood and adolescence, opinions and descriptions of fur suits and fursuiters, sexual activities at conventions, traits characteristic of fursonas, how and why individuals identified with fursonas, descriptions of art, both clean and yiff, how individuals viewed mundanes, how individuals came into contact with the fandom, how individuals viewed the controversy over the identity of the fandom, furry descriptions of various animal species, and a host of other themes. I abandoned some potential themes, such as plushophilia (the love of stuffed animals), when I found these themes to be underrepresented in the data, despite the prevalence of online descriptions of these aspects of furry culture.

The fact that I had reached the saturation point was evidenced by the data. All but two of the interviewees formally interviewed had expressed some degree of anomie during adolescence, with most of these interviewees expressing what I would label as “extreme discontent,” in regard to their teenage experiences. This discontent can best be summarized by the words of a fursuiter and jokingly, self-professed “furvert,” He stated, “Fakes in nature… Preps and emos were all about making my life as uncomfortable as they could… I was so alone at that time when I didn’t know about furs.” All of these interviewees expressed an affinity for childhood imagery and attitudes (such as an affinity for the innocence, cuteness, and even physical prowess of their favorite cartoon characters). This emphasis on childhood can be summarized in the words on an
interviewee, who stated, “I’ve got that typical furry story of having watched Disney’s Robin Hood 50,000 times.” The other themes of this thesis (such as the role of the fursona as a tool for personal reinvention) were also subject to the same kind of analysis and are equally evidenced by the data.
CHAPTER III
FURSONAS, FURSUITS, AND MEANING

Furry Backgrounds: Common Patterns

It is necessary to examine the backgrounds of individuals in order to fully grasp the process of revitalization in regards to the furry fandom. According to Wallace’s theoretical model, the impetus for revitalization stems from the breaking down of an individual’s mazeway, due to the presence of stressors. Fortunately, the stressors described by individual interviewees are strikingly similar, and the methods used to adapt to these stressors are also shared by most of the interviewees. These stressors primarily stem from how individuals view themselves in relation to peer groups and, as a result, the process of revitalization and the adaptations necessary to that process reflect crucial background information. Fifty-four individuals were asked about their background information during formal interviews. Informal interviewees (those not asked a predetermined set of questions, but rather allowed to talk about whatever interested them at the time) also shared background information with me.

In regards to the backgrounds of individual furries, there are several key differences. For starters, the interviewees represent considerable geographic diversity. Far from universally hailing from giant urban centers, a slim majority of the interviewees came from moderate to small cities, representing every region of the nation. There was
even an interviewee from Europe. The individuals also differed in regards to economic status. While the majority of subjects came from lower to middle-middle class backgrounds, a few interviewees came from what most people would consider relatively comfortable backgrounds. Some were children of factory workers from industrial regions and some were the children of teachers and managers. There were also a few interviewees who grew up below the poverty line.

Spirituality seemed to be a promising area of inquiry for this study. After all, if individuals are engaged in activities that would generally be deemed anathema by many conventional religious institutions (and conventional society in general), then the religious backgrounds of individuals might be important in analyzing stressors, since the movement could possibly be the result of rebellion against established religion. While the fandom certainly does represent a rejection of some conventional values, I believe that a disdain for religion in general is not a primary motivator for participation. A slim majority of the interviewees expressed a strong belief in some kind of supernatural entity or force, ranging from a belief in God to a belief in magic. Furthermore, one of the individuals identified himself as a Christian with some fundamentalist beliefs, and he assured me that there was a prominent community of furries with similar outlooks. Given the fact that I’ve witnessed a Christian service at a convention, I have no doubts that this albeit small minority exists fully within the auspices of the general subculture, and the individual was adamant about the religious diversity and tolerance found within the fandom. Of the few self-professed atheists included in the study, none expressed outright hostility to religion, though they mostly regarded it as outdated and foolish. A majority of
interviewees stated that religion was practiced in the households of their childhoods, but only seven individuals described this practice as being particularly repressive.

Attitudes towards sexual orientation are also surprisingly diverse. Of those formally interviewed, twenty-four considered themselves to be bisexual, seven described themselves as homosexual (one of these individuals changed his orientation twice during the interview), seven stated that they were heterosexual, and sixteen stated that they were either uncertain or didn’t believe in conventional concepts of sexual orientation. What is most important is that all but a handful felt as though their first “real” relationships occurred after they began participating in the subculture. Most of the interviewees stated that a new, renewed, and/or spiked interest in homosexual relationships occurred after their introduction into the fandom. The majority of the non-heterosexual interviewees described past heterosexual relationships as being unfulfilling, or in some cases unattainable (some fursuiters expressed misogynistic sentiments), and that the fandom provided them with an outlet for sexual repression and love-relationships in an atmosphere in which individuals felt safe.

One surprising feature shared by the majority of interviewees was what appears to be a contradiction between what subjects stated about sexual orientation and who these individuals express the most attraction to. Furry art consists of sexualized female animal-human hybrids as well as male ones, and the many self-professed homosexual interviewees expressed an attraction to women. It’s obvious even to the casual observer that the few women present at conventions are often swamped with potential suitors, and it’s a common joke among some members of the fandom that more desperate furries often harass any heterosexual women in the nearby area (furries are surprisingly
comfortable joking about themselves). Furthermore, furry artworks sometimes exhibit images of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, with male creatures as the perpetrators and female creatures as the victims.

The official stance of almost every furry convention and website is that the fandom is not primarily a homosexual subculture and that all orientations are tolerated. While the tolerance for all orientations is certainly present, however, the majority of furries at any given convention are “officially” gay or bisexual men. As stated earlier, however, furry sexuality as a whole cannot be understood as “straight,” “gay,” or “bi.”

Most of the interviewees were attracted to women, even if they were “officially” gay and involved in a long-term relationship with another man. The objects of sexual adoration in art are often feminine, and many furries wear suits intended to look like feminine creatures.

What does all this mean? The conclusion I have drawn is that furries, known for defying categorization and convention in other spheres of life, are also engaged in a freer dialogue in regards to sexual orientation. Hungry for love and approval and eager to give love and approval, the interviewees refused to limit their access to potential partners and, though they might prefer either male or female partners, many can still have emotionally and sexually connected relationships that contradict their claims regarding orientation. In other words, the fandom has, more so than society-at-large, transcended the boundaries of sexual orientation in order to meet the romantic and sexual needs of individuals.

However, this breaking down of boundaries is not initially the result of ideological shifts in beliefs about gender. To the contrary, it often stems from the practical necessities of individuals in what they described as desperate situations. Most of
the interviewees were not ardent advocates of gay rights or critics of relationship norms. One fursuiter jokingly stated, when referring to his own homosexual experiences, “Furs take what they can get.” This practical need for acceptance and belonging breaks down barriers that would in other contexts limit relationship choices. Some furries, coming from backgrounds in which relationships were unfulfilling or unavailable, reacted to circumstance by expanding their pool of available companions and partners. An individual could have been heterosexual before his or her introduction into the fandom, and homosexual afterwards, and vice-versa. However, this is not by any means a universal pattern. There were many interviewees who maintained their previous orientation after their introduction into the fandom.

The above interviewee’s admission of desperation is going to strike a nerve with many furries. Put down as pariahs and often described by enemies of the fandom as sociopaths, some furries tend to be sensitive to any portrayal of them as being introverted, anti-social, and lonely. However, one reason for the fandom’s popularity is its ability to reach out to people who have felt shunned and the fandom provides these individuals with an outlet to overcome negative aspects of their pasts. Furthermore, this sensitivity is unwarranted, since some interviewees have overcome issues such as obesity, social awkwardness, anti-social reflexes, and shyness by participating in the fandom.

Why Animals?

Groups of individuals gathering together to meet potential romantic interests isn’t uncommon or new. What sets most furries apart from other groups are the specific practices of members of the fandom, especially the use of cartoony suits as expressions of
identity and sexuality. Why are anthropomorphic creatures eroticized and celebrated in
the fandom? How do these creatures represent identity and sexual availability? The
backgrounds of interviewees are extremely important to consider when answering these
questions, as I believe they hold the key to understand the over-arching meaning of
anthropomorphic symbolism in the fandom.

While the interviewees differed in many ways, virtually all of them shared key
patterns in regards to their development as children and adolescents. These patterns can
provide a persuasive and powerful explanation for furry behavior, namely the wearing of
fur suits and the presence of animal themes in erotic art. Virtually every interviewee
expressed a large degree of affection for nostalgia and features of childhood culture.
Furries on the whole view their early childhoods with longing for past happiness. On the
other hand, the period of adolescence and sexual maturity is viewed in an extremely
negative fashion, and elements of teenage culture are viewed with suspicion and
contempt. During adolescence, the vast majority of interviewees were denied acceptance
into peer groups. The most common reason interviewees gave for this isolation was a
combination of cruelty and hypocrisy on the part of peers. Of course, these same
interviewees also cited shyness, an inability to relate to peers, a heightened level of
insecurity, and physical reasons such as extreme obesity or unattractive features as partly
responsible for their adolescent woes. These individuals were denied access to what
many would describe as conventional teenage behaviors. Relatively friendless and
alienated, many individuals developed along different lines than peers with access to
friends, dating, sports, etc. What resulted was a desire to continue the comforts of
childhood. Though the armchair psychologist might describe these individuals as
developmentally “behind,” development still continued, albeit on an altered course. All of
the interviewees described a continued, vibrant interest in elements of childhood. This
interest continues to the present. One of the most pervasive features of this interest is a
continued desire to watch cartoons, read comics, and draw characters.

However, though the development of these individuals differed significantly from
peers, the natural maturation of puberty occurred all the same. Denied access to coming
of age experiences, furries imbue images of childhood with sexual attributes. Unable to
be asexual as in earlier life, furries have created a new outlet for their own sexual
empowerment and expression. This outlet allows them to be aroused and sexually active,
yet at the same time exists in a format that they find comforting. To understand the
process by which this sexual development emerges, it’s necessary to describe how
interviewees viewed childhood and adolescence in greater detail.

Furries described childhood in romanticized, idyllic terms. Very few interviewees
stated that they had experienced significant problems with parents or other relatives.
Most furries were adamant about the pristine nature of their childhoods. The great
majority of interviewees expressed no serious, damning condemnation of parents. To the
contrary, parental issues seemed to be largely confined to the teenage years, in a form
that most people would call “normal.” Most of the interviewees described happy,
engaged childhoods. Some had fairly intensive relationships with extended family
members. Like, most children, they were primarily engaged in social interaction with
parents, siblings, or other family members. Furries enjoy telling tales of watching
particular cartoons or reading comic books, and/or playing different outside games with
siblings and cousins. Furries often spoke fondly of pets also. The childhoods of
interviewees, while charmed in their minds, seemed to lack stories or descriptions of early friends. In elementary school, many of these individuals did not assimilate into peer groups. Interviewees were isolated from peer groups early on, preferring their own company and the company of close family members. Far from being seen as a source of negativity, interviewees were proud of their early loner status. They advocated isolation during interviews. One interviewee intensely stated, “Most people are assholes. I say population control.” There’s an element of intentional drama in that statement. This interviewee was not expressing a serious demand for a reduction in the number of human beings, but was trying to express to me the impact of his past sufferings on his current happiness and welfare. The context of that statement was a discussion about the bullying he received during his teenage years, which bordered on callous cruelty.

Many interviewees stated that they were never able to succeed in school even at an early age, despite possessing above-average intelligence. Being overweight, shy, or possessing some other attribute that might encourage teasing or isolation, furries tended to adapt to being loners. As a result of their isolation, these children took comfort in television shows and other outlets for engagement that didn’t rely on social interaction with peers. This lack of social interaction compounded their social awkwardness and inexperience, resulting in a near-complete inability to relate to others during adolescence.

Though interviewees viewed aspects of childhood culture in an ennobling light, they had a large degree of animosity toward so-called “teenage activities.” These activities include teenage experimentation with drugs and alcohol, adolescent relationships, sports, academics, popular music and trends, etc. During their teenage years, these individuals were denied sources for the dissemination of popular youth
culture, and vehemently maintained childhood interests. Instead of high-school parties and prom dates, interviewees spent their time watching and drawing cartoon characters (many developed astounding artistic skills), playing fantasy games, and, once the internet became a feature of their lives, searching for like-minded individuals online.

The eroticization of childhood images is evidenced by the manner in which some furries describe their sexual tastes. Many interviewees (especially fursuiters) expressed their sexual interests toward certain ideas or images in a unique way. When they discussed their desires and what they find attractive, many used a combination of innocuous language and graphic, sexual statements. For example, interviewees would initially describe the objects of their sexual interests, which were as likely to be female anthropomorphs as male ones, as “cute,” “sweet,” “playful,” or use some other adjective with childish connotations. On the other hand, as the conversation progressed, individuals would then describe the sexually graphic behaviors they desired to commence with their fantasy creatures. In general, many furries’ negative adolescent experiences, combined with positive childhood memories, altered the development of individuals as they entered sexual maturity and adulthood. What we might call “regular” pornography, if such a term is permitted, is more likely to instill insecurity and negative reactions in many interviewees, who had a tendency to attack it for being “fake,” while images and symbols of childhood security and safety are imbued with sexual attributes to provide a more gratifying mode of sexual imagery. Though many individuals were denied, for the most part, access to coming of age experiences and effective transitions to conventional or semi-conventional sex lives, they have also redefined what is erotic and attractive according to their own values.
This explains the “cartoony” nature of fur suits. Far from being accurate renditions of other species, the suits generally resemble school mascots. They are non-threatening, not overtly sexual or powerful, and do not in any way resemble what might be considered arousing by the standards of the society at large. To furries, they are described as “cute” or “cuddly,” and lack carnal connotations on the surface. If an individual were to wear a typical fur suit to an amusement park, park-goers would assume that the individual was part of the staff. The individual would almost certainly be flocked by children seeking photographs, hugs, etc. However, below the surface fur suits often contain an array of sexual features. These fur suits sometimes contain zippers and removable pouches that allow for access to erogenous zones. Furthermore, some fur suits contain sheathes for sexual organs to intensify or simulate intercourse. Fur suits are often worn during sexual acts and, according to informants, are a key indicator of desire. When an individual is wearing a fur suit, many interpret that individual as desiring another fursuiter for a partner. When asked why individuals wore fur suits, one informant stated his answer bluntly, “Because they are looking for ass.” While not all sexual activities at conventions occur between individuals wearing suits, the wearing of suits is the preferred method, in part because of the eroticized symbolism of the suits themselves and in part because of the sense of security individuals possess while wearing suits. Suits do not necessarily make sex anonymous, due to the fact that individuals often know who is wearing them, but they do detach participants from the act enough to remove insecurities and to minimize the risk of rejection. This is evidenced by the fact that interviewees did not refer to engaging in sexual activities with people but rather the fursonas represented by the suits. This also may be due to a desire to maintain anonymity in the presence of an
outside interviewer, but interviewees described the genitals and pouches of suits in affectionate detail, indicating a specific desire for the suit versus the person inside.

Due to the detached nature of sex in the fandom, individuals are able literally to mask their appearances, including flaws such as obesity, poor features, handicaps, etc. The aesthetic qualities of the suits completely hide the body shapes of individuals wearing them, enabling furries to pursue sex without the self-consciousness and physical limitations imposed on many of them outside the fandom. Furthermore, the highly regulated code of conduct concerning the wearing of suits prohibits them from speaking, thus protecting them from the effects of their own social phobias and awkward personalities. As a result, the objects of desire become the suits themselves, and fursuiters spend thousands of dollars to construct suits made of velvet, felt, or other expensive materials. The costumes of the suits are also generally as elaborate as possible, since according to most fursuiter interviewees the suit is what attracts prospective partners. The species represented by the suits have fairly specific meanings, but more on that will be covered in the taxonomy section of the thesis.

There is another advantage to the use of animal symbolism that is far less obvious to the observer than the advantages mentioned above. By glorifying and adopting animal symbolism, furries might not merely detach themselves from their insecurities and any undesirable traits of their partners. They can also detach themselves from any conventional moral guidelines in regards to sexuality. Many scholars have written about the distinction between culture and nature, and the amoral, instinctual behaviors of animals. In many influential works, from the Bible to fairy tales, animals have been portrayed as outside of the ethical realm, relying primarily on instinct. As a result, many
furries see them as being beyond blame for their sexual behaviors. Though the sexual practices of furries stem ultimately from the desire for security, the use of animal symbolism also provides a moral justification.

However, furries do not see animals as being totally amoral. To the contrary, some furries glorify the “naturalness” of animal sexual practices and see animals as being immune to the forces that influence human beings to be universally corrupt. The end result is that animals are not only seen as possessing moral fiber but as being beacons of virtue in a world continually harmed by humanity. When interviewed, the majority of subjects blamed specific individuals in their adolescence as evidence of this human corruption, at the same time citing pets and wild animals as models of just behavior. For example, one interviewee from a Midwestern, rural background cited a school principal as always out to get him as a teenaged but later on crafted a practical eulogy for the loving and understanding family dog. Not surprisingly, this individual owned a dog suit. This moral dichotomy of the just nature of animals versus the corrupt nature of humanity is the reverse of the traditional western model. It is the counterexample to the epigraph by Tennyson.

The instinctual, sexual behavior of animals was not described as barbaric or shameful in any sense by fursuiter interviewees. In fact, these interviewees often cited animal behaviors as justification for sexual freedom, and often described human-imposed ethical limits on free sexuality as tools of oppression and domination. It is not illogical for many furries to view sexual mores this way. After all, many feel that their own romantic options have been unjustly limited by their appearances, by the cruel characters of the people present during adolescence, and by their general aversion to social
situations. For example, one interviewee stated bluntly, “If it wasn’t for the con, most of them would never get laid.” Denied access to conventional modes of sexual expression and behavior, many furries have revitalized sexual mores to allow for, and even glorify, relationships with other furs and the sexual practices of the fandom, such as the wearing of suits and the use of animal-shaped sex toys. This revitalized moral scheme is necessary to justify relationships that most interviewees considered absolutely vital to the well being and happiness of individuals who were previously ostracized.

Furry Taxonomy

Due to the sheer diversity of attitudes, values, and behaviors expressed by members of the fandom, the process of creating a valid taxonomy has been arduous. However, I have identified several “stages” of development that many individuals experience as they become assimilated into the fandom. These stages are sequential and are in many ways analogous to religious indoctrination, in that the stage of development is indicative of that individual’s level of participation in the fandom. The stage of an individual is indicative of the degree to which that individual shares the fandom’s collective goal of revitalization. This is particularly true of sexual values. I have assigned a taxonomic category to each one of these stages.

Though the individuals with the highest visibility and level of participation in the fandom experience all four sequential stages, not every individual will transition to the later stages. These stages function as not only a stepping stone to further participation, but also as an end in themselves. This allows individuals to regulate their own participation in the fandom and still support and identify with it.
The first stage I want to discuss is that of the “lurker.” “Lurker” is an emic term and is used to describe individuals who are interested in learning about the fandom. The term is pertinent in that the vast majority of the thousands of individuals interested in the subculture first encounter the fandom by “lurking” on the internet, anonymously perusing the multitude of literature, art, and information contained in furry websites. This category consists of individuals who have not yet attended a convention or may not wish to fully participate and identify with the fandom. In reality there are thousands of people seeking to learn about the fandom. However a great number these individuals may simply be thrill-seekers or connoisseurs of so-called “Internet Phenomena.” Some may actively seek to harass or abuse furries by “trolling” their websites or harassing them at conventions. Furries primarily use the term “lurker” to describe curious individuals who might potentially become more involved with the fandom.

Due to relatively recent events, there has been a reactionary backlash in the fandom. I will go into further detail regarding these events in the history section of the thesis. One of the central themes of this backlash is the desire to shield the fandom from negative publicity. Several pop culture websites and other forms of media have attacked or attempted to slander the fandom, at least from the point of view of furries. Websites such as Somethingawful.com and other groups have wide followings and have ruthlessly demeaned and parodied furries, even to the point of infiltrating conventions. The worst incident for many furries was the 2003 portrayal of furries as sexual psychopaths in the network crime-drama *CSI*. Many furries feel grossly misrepresented by the media and as a result are extremely protective of the fandom’s image.
This has resulted in a major attempt by websites and conventions to deemphasize the sexual element of the fandom. However, interview data supports the idea that furry sexuality is one of the driving forces behind conventions, furry art, and the overall subculture. Sexual empowerment is a central theme of revitalization for furries, and the greater majority of interviewees (including informants who weren’t formally interviewed) engages in some form of sexual revitalization (such as creating sexually active fursonas or artworks) or generally acknowledges sexuality as “a good chunk” of the movement. Also, the great majority of furry artwork on display almost always meets the legal criteria defining pornography.

This does not mean that those who deemphasize the sexual culture of the fandom are lying, however, by stating that being a furry is not synonymous with participating in furry sexuality. There are minorities of individuals who do not participate, and they are not shunned by sexually active fursuiters. This in part explains the rapid growth of the fandom. The different modes or “stages” of furriness can accommodate many different individuals, all of whom can seek different aspects of revitalization and can participate or abstain from furry sexuality entirely of their own volition. Individuals can always progress to a more involved stage, or can remain as they are and still be considered part of the larger community.

This effort to minimize discussion about furry sexuality is really an attempt to make the fandom more accessible to lurkers encountering it for the first time. Many individuals might be initially hesitant about participating sexually, but might also become more congenial to the idea once they have experienced what the fandom has to offer. Furthermore, individuals who do not sexually participate can still aid in revitalization, in
that they can still enter into friendships with sexually-active fursuiters, create and encourage the production of art, engage in the creation of fursonas, and foster the sense of identity and camaraderie by tolerating furry sexuality in others.

If an individual has been favorably acquainted with the fandom, and desires to become further assimilated, he or she will most likely don a tail or ears. This is the next stage of enculturation. I call individuals belonging to this category “general furries,” for lack of an emic term. This stage of development can serve as a stepping stone to further participation in the fandom or can be an end in itself. The tail is usually made of fabric or plush and the ears are usually fashioned from plastic or fabric. The presence of a tail and ears can indicate that an individual has made a compromise with the larger fandom. Tails and ears signify tolerance, belonging, and solidarity with fursuiters, but at the same they also signify that an individual is not necessarily comfortable with taking part in the fandom’s sexual activities. Most avowed heterosexuals, who form a minority in the fandom, show their solidarity with the larger subculture by displaying tails and ears. Female furries, who form an even smaller minority, generally wear tails and ears as well. Tails and ears are not permanently worn throughout the entire convention, however, and individuals don them and discard them at their own volition.

However, a significant portion of general furries that I encountered during the course of my study desired full-fledged fur suits. For some (though by no means all) general furries, the wearing of tails and ears is a step towards transitioning to full participation in the sexual practices of the fandom. This stage allows these individuals to control their own introductions into the sexual life of the subculture, all the while maintaining a sense of belonging with the fandom as a whole. Like the lurkers described
above, general fursuiters can support revitalization by eventually ascended to the final stage of complete revitalization, or by showing support and solidarity with fursuiters.

If a general furry remains in his or her current stage of development, and never transitions to becoming a full-fledged fursuiter, what do they get out of the fandom? The answer is that these individuals are not solely an audience for fursuiters, nor are they only a potential pool of recruits. To the contrary, they comprise the largest chunk of the overall fandom. However, they also experience revitalization as part of the larger process. The tiny minority of individuals who might be completely uncomfortable with furry sexuality can still benefit from being part of the subculture in a way similar to fursuiters (though most “general furries” either create and/or view yiffy art, and many engage in sexual activities at conventions). The fandom is as tolerant of those who abstain from furry sexuality as it is for those who participate. Non-fursuiter interviewees suffer from many of the same problems as fursuiter interviewees, albeit to a markedly lesser degree. The veneration of childhood and hatred of adolescence described earlier is present in the worldviews of general furries as well. These individuals, even those who do not transition to the next stage of furry development, often suffer from problems such as obesity, a lack of social skills, low status, and poor self-esteem. These individuals may not be as burdened by these problems as fursuiters, and as a result may be in a position to engage in sexual relationships outside of the fandom. This was the case for a number of general furry interviewees. Individuals who do not eventually obtain suits nevertheless show the same escapist tendencies as fursuiters. However, since they are generally more skilled at coping with the external world, this escapism is not as extreme as it is for fursuiters. Most still create fursonas and oftentimes create artistic works that portray the
idealized characters. Their fursonas are equally idyllic and most often sexualized. The biggest difference between a fursuiter and a general furry is that the fursuiter attempts to live out the fantasies while general furries want a more limited experience. This stage of development allows individuals to limit their degree of participation in the fandom, yet still provides individuals with a renewed sense of identity, fellowship, and external approval.

Fursuiters (an emic term) often go to great lengths to acquire fur suits. One interviewee paid $3,000 for his suit. Another interviewee spent six weeks building his own from basic materials. The purchase or creation of a fur suit demonstrates the intensity of an individual’s commitment to the fandom, in that an individual must spend a substantial amount of money or time to obtain one. Fursuiters proudly display their suits at conventions, and they generally receive most of the attention in the community.

Most interviewees considered the presence of a fur suit to be a virtually universal indicator that an individual is seeking sexual contact with another fursuiter. According to most interviewees, the fur suit and fursona are the objects of attraction for other fursuiters. When furries don suits, the individuals inside those suits cease to be objects of concern. The fursona takes over and, in the minds of sexually active furries, sex involves two fursonas, not two furries. Thus fursuiters go to great lengths to ensure that their suits are as well-crafted and designed as possible. The suit, not the individual inside, attracts or repels potential sex partners.

Though fursuiters are a minority in the fandom, it is the fursuiter that primarily defines the fandom to the non-furry world and thus receives the most condemnation. Unlike some general furries, the vast majority of fursuiters have very little to no positive
contact with the world of “mundanes.” They are admired by general furries who have not yet acquired suits and also by other fursuiters, but this comes at a great cost. Fursuiters often feel the need to “come out” to parents and friends and, as a result, many of the ties that bind them to the mundane world are irrevocably severed. Interestingly enough, every interviewee who described coming out emphasized his status as a fursuiter, not as a man who engages in homosexual sex. The fursona and the escape it offers become an integral part in an individual’s happiness and identity. Even in coming out the emphasis is on the fursona and the suit, rather than on outside concepts of sexual orientation. Needless to say this often baffles and disgusts parents, relatives, and friends and the fursuiter has no choice but to sever contact and immerse himself more deeply in the fandom.

The fursuiter is the last stage of development in our sequence. For the fursuiter, revitalization is extreme. While wearing the suit and engaging in sex acts, he completely masks his own identity. The fursona replaces the self, and the shortcomings of the self are completely eradicated by the prowess, virtue, and attractiveness of the fursona. For the fursuiter, acceptance, intimacy, and belonging are present in a way they never were outside of the fandom.

Another taxonomic category I want to discuss doesn’t concern this sequence, but rather a set of beliefs about the fandom. I call the furries who belong to this category “mystic furs,” in that their participation in the fandom has a spiritual element. This is an emic term, and “mystic furs” may be fursuiters or general furries. Some mystic furs believe that their souls consist of their fursonas, and that the process of creating fursonas involves a sort of spiritual enlightenment. Others argue that they have become possessed by their fursonas and as a result have no choice but to acquiesce to their newfound animal
nature. Others worship creatures of their own choosing in order that they might gain the attributes of these creatures. “Mystic furs” comprise a small minority within the fandom, and as a result I decided to avoid focusing more on them due to practical constraints.

Perhaps future research might yield more than a basic description. There are several furry resources on the Internet that cater to furries who profess a spiritual connection to their fursonas, and this would be a most intriguing area for future study.

The last category I want to discuss is not part of the sequence, either. However, it is extremely important in that it illustrates that even the fandom has its deviants. These deviants are called, “furverts,” and they have the lowest status of all. “Furvert” is an emic term, and though it is often affectionately used as a friendly jibe, when used earnestly it is entirely derogatory. Furverts are individuals who are not tolerated by the vast majority and are often barred from online chats and other events. When interviewees described furverts, they nearly always referred to middle-aged men. Interviewees portrayed furverts as predators, stalking conventions for younger partners.

It is not age that makes a furvert, however. The great majority of older men in the fandom are not labeled as such, and this mainly has to do with the fact that they are not sexually aggressive and have values similar to those of the overwhelming majority of younger furries (most interviewees were between 20 and 30 years old). The furvert did not necessarily experience adolescence in the same way as many younger furries. He is not reacting to the same pressures, and is not gaining the same benefits as younger members of the fandom. He is not engaged in the overall process of revitalization and, unlike younger furries, the furvert isn’t interested in suits or fursonas. The furvert is much more likely to be an ardent homosexual. According to interviewees, his goal is to seek
out young men for “mundane” homosexual relationships, and he only pays token respect to the values of the fandom.

I interviewed one so-called “furvert.” This individual did differ from other furries in regards to age and values, but I also found him to be at least semi-deranged. This individual was clearly in the throes of some sort of madness. His interests were extremely bizarre. He was extremely aggressive and constantly harassed other furries.

He showed me some of his drawings, and these were equally disturbing. I couldn’t locate any discernible forms in the splotches of pink and brown scribbling, but he described the characters and activity of each drawing without hesitation. He seemed to believe that these characters and events were completely real. He complained about actions his characters were going to perform as if he had no control over them. As a matter of fact, he often stated that he wanted to stop these characters but that they wouldn’t “listen to reason,” and I found this to be extremely disconcerting. He actually believed the creatures he drew were real, entirely separate entities. Needless to say, this individual didn’t have a real fursona. This is the trademark of the furvert. If he shares any values with other furries he only does so to justify his presence at conventions, and “true” furries (both young and older furries) see this as phony. The furvert’s main goal is basic sex. According to interviewees, the benefits provided by fursonas and fur suits are just obstacles he deals with to satisfy his lechery. Of course, it is important to remember that the majority of older furries do not fit into this category and undergo the same revitalization process as younger furries.
The Fursona and the Meaning of Furry Costume

One of my research goals has been to decode the meaning of furry costume. I have already discussed the overall meaning of tails, ears, and fur suits as symbols of sexual availability. The suits themselves, however, also contain meaning, particularly in regard to species. It is important to remember that the suits are physical representations (and in a sense incarnations) of fursonas. Thus the meaning of an individual’s fursona is for the most part synonymous with the meaning of an individual’s fur suit. Works of art and fur suits can thus be understood as the substance of revitalization, while fursonas are the forms from which these substances take their shapes and meaning. General furries describe fursonas in the same terms as fursuiters, save for the fact that the fursonas of general furries seem to place less emphasis on the sex life and sexual attributes of their fursonas (though sex plays a role in the makeup of most of these fursonas as well).

It’s also important to remember that fursonas aren’t merely fictional characters designed to provide entertainment and artistic subjects for imaginative furries. The fursonas actually represent an idealized self-image. Many furries feel as though their fursonas are a part of them. This is partly evidenced by the need to come out (and present fursonas) to parents and friends, which I examined earlier. According to interviewees, the fursona possesses traits similar to those of its creator, and most furries and virtually all fursuiters see their fursonas as extensions of themselves. The fursona is an idealized, sexually empowered version of the creator. The fursona is thus an important tool of revitalization, in that by creating and acting out the lives of fursonas, furries actively engage in the reconstruction of their own identities. Fursonas and the suits that stem from them have allowed fursuiters to redefine completely what is attractive, what is
appropriate, and who is “good enough” to engage in sexual activity. The fur suit and fursona combine to create an artificial reality in which one can become intimate and feel loved without risk or fear.

The choice of species is extremely important when examining this interplay between personality and fursona. Just as the attributes and behaviors of fursonas are drawn from positive aspects of a furry’s self image, the species of a fur suit can also tell a great deal about the personality of the creator. The species of a fursona can tell us a great deal about the problems its creator faced during adolescence. The species of a fursona also reveals how the creator dealt with these problems.

A wide variety of species are present at conventions. Fursonas are most often drawn from real-world species, but I have also encountered fursonas based on mythological creatures and animal hybrids. Virtually every real world species has some sort of representation in the fandom. However, the vast majority of suits and fursonas are based on the fox, the wolf, and the skunk. These three species make up a sizeable majority of all fursonas, for reasons I shall discuss below.

Of all the species represented by fur suits, the fox is by far the most prevalent. Approximately half of the fursonas were foxes. Interviewees corroborated this conclusion, citing conventions where the ratio of foxes to other species was even higher. Most of these foxes are red, though black, brown, and grey foxes are not unheard of. The influence of the fox is not only confined to fursonas, however. Fox-based terminology has influenced the vocabulary of the virtually every fursuiter. The terms “yiff” and “scratches,” which we will discuss later, have their origins in the perceived behaviors of foxes.
Why the fox? During interviews, I gathered that interviewees closely identified with their fox fursonas. A great majority of furries believe that they themselves possess fox-like virtues, and that these qualities are central to their participation in the fandom. The fox, more than any other species, is a glaring symbol of revitalization. It epitomizes the values and virtues of the fandom, as well as the struggle with adolescence and the inability or lack of desire to function in the world of mundanes.

First of all, interviewees gravitated to the notion that the fox is universally hated. One calls to mind the old fairy tales in which foxes steal chicken eggs and are driven out by angry farmers. The fox is guilty of entering the human environment and as a result is punished and often killed. The old story is analogous to the adolescence experiences of many furries, who feel that they always sought to belong, but were instead driven out by unsympathetic and ignorant people. This is not the only aspect of fox mythology that appeals to furries. The fox hunt is also a symbol of the oppression of the past. An interviewee stated, “Fox hunts are ------. A fox is out in nature and some ------- kills it and is like, ‘Hey, you die for my recreation.’” This sense of unwarranted persecution was a frequent theme, and there are many correlations between the fox hunt and the adolescent experiences of fursuiters. First of all, the fox is completely innocent (this is very important to furries). Secondly, the wealthy, athletic fox hunters share many qualities with the bullies, athletes, and “rich kids” who furries universally perceive as enemies. Just as the fox is driven from his hole by wealthy aristocrats, so were furries driven out of their childhood comfort zones by kids with more status.

Interviewees did not only focus on the persecution of the fox, however. According to them, the fox of mythology also possesses many virtues, which they themselves take
pride in. The fox is sneaky, clever, and often able to benefit from human society despite his status as a pariah. He steals eggs, hens, etc, and is often able to elude his pursuers, despite their guns and dogs, a type of Aesop’s fable frequently lauded by interviewees. The fox can exist in the human environment and sneak away to his isolated burrow. Many fox-suiters see their own participation in human society in this way. Interviewees often described how they were pulling a fast one on employers, family members, and especially past antagonists by reinventing themselves in the fandom, which is analogous to a burrow, safe from outside predators. Furries believe that they are extremely intelligent and that they, like the fox, have cleverly found a sanctuary despite the efforts of others.

The sexual behaviors of foxes are also a key component of fursonas. Most furries believe that foxes are extremely affectionate and sexually active. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant for our purposes. Furries see themselves as similar beings, in that they believe they lack the judgmental attitudes of the outside world, and that they are capable of intense love and affection despite being persecuted. This idealization of fox sexuality not only affects fox-suiters, but the fandom as a whole. The term “yiff” which is a general term used to describe furry sexuality and erotic art, supposedly stems from the perceived mating sounds of foxes. Furthermore, according to some interviewees, “scritches,” which are affectionate, pawing strokes given and received by fursuiters, are also based on the perceived mating ritual of foxes.

Fox suits symbolize the virtues of fox fursonas. With so many fox suits in the fandom, it is only natural that there are many variations that express the individuality of those who wear them. Fox suits are generally more slender than other designs, though
they have the characteristic “happy” features of other suits, such as big, cartoony eyes, and wide, welcoming smiles. Foxes, however, also tend to have accessories that emphasize intellectual rather than physical prowess. For example, many fox suits contain pseudo-mechanical parts that resemble robotic arms, legs, or other implants. Furthermore, interviewees stated that fox fursonas were much more likely to wear glasses, another symbol of intellectual sophistication.

The second most common species in regards to fur-suits is the wolf. Wolf suits are the largest minority in the fandom. According to my data, wolves represent approximately one out of ten fur suits. Like fox suits and fursonas, wolf characters also represent the struggles and strengths of their creators. However, less emphasis is placed on intellectual virtues (such as the sneaky, clever intelligence of the fox), and more emphasis is placed on brute strength and physical prowess.

The wolf fursona also suffers from many of the same circumstances as the fox. These circumstances also mirror mythology and older, western attitudes towards animals. Interviewees with wolf suits emphasized their own physical strength. Most wolf-suiter informants and interviewees have had to contend with obesity, in comparison with those who wear fur suits of other species. However, though this might be true of many of those with wolf fursonas, it is not universal. One wolf interviewee was extremely physically fit. However, he had been obese as an adolescent. He was still a good bit taller and stockier than average. Though some fox interviewees and those of other species are also overweight (this is not universal, however), in the minds of fursuiters there is a clear correlation between wolf suits and being physically large.
This is extremely significant due to the fact that, though wolf-suiters maintain a negative view of their adolescent experiences, they feel that they were not merely condemned but also feared. Too big to be physically bullied, for the most part wolf-suiter interviewees felt that they were shunned due to social-awkwardness and large size. The mythology of the wolf and the fear it generates also echo this experience of “fursecution.” Fairy tales and other stories often portray wolves as vicious, predatory beasts. The contemporary slaughter of wolves by ranchers in the western United States illustrates this continuing fear of predatory wolves. Unlike the fox, the wolf does not survive by being clever but rather by being physically indomitable. This, however, is where the parallel ends. Wolf-suiters universally ignore the wolf’s propensity toward social interaction, preferring to portray their fursonas as loners who are denied access to society.

One interviewee quoted Machiavelli’s “Better to be feared than loved” adage during an interview. A more accurate statement would have been “Better to be feared than be subjugated.” The desire for approval, intimacy, and affection is a key desire for almost all fursuiters, and wolf-suiters are hardly exceptionally vicious or stand-offish in the eyes of other furries. Wolf-suiter interviewees do consider themselves to be more masculine than foxes and other species, and this is evidenced by the fact that most other fur suits that have “strategically placed holes” can accommodate both male and female sexual roles (the anatomy can be both insertive and receptive during sex), while most wolf suits remain exclusively masculine. One interviewee regarded foxes as “little pets,” whom he lovingly protected. The accessories attached to wolf suits are often violent in nature. Swords, axes, and other weapons are often included. Sports attire such as baseball
or football jerseys and helmets are also often features of the wolf, though these are broad
generalizations and a great deal of variety in regards to accessories exists, as with
anything relating to the fandom.

The third most prevalent species is the skunk. Why anyone would want to emulate
and glorify a skunk might puzzle some readers, but skunk suits and fursonas also follow
the pattern discussed earlier. From a conventional standpoint, the skunk is more
undesirable than the fox and perhaps even the wolf, and it is this undesirability that
attracts interviewees to them. The skunk is a foul smelling, anti-social creature many
consider to be a pest. This foulness mirrors how those who don skunk suits see their
pasts. Whereas the wolf is feared for his power, the skunk is anathema solely due to his
lack of attractiveness. Skunks, like other furries, often lack social skills and/or are “net
nerds,” as one skunk put it. One major difference between skunk interviewees and others
is that skunk fursonas are often more flawed. Whereas wolf and fox fursonas are often as
idealized as Hellenistic heroes, skunk fursonas often have one or more exaggerated flaws
(obviously, smell is often included in these). These can also be ditziness, clumsiness, and
even an extremely voracious sex drive. During interviews, the creators of these fursonas
seemed to focus on their own flaws more than other species, who mainly emphasized
their more positive traits. We can thus understand the archetypal skunk as a more self-
reflexive furry, who has come to terms with his personal drawbacks and is not afraid to
acknowledge them. Interviewees emphasized their own beauty despite these flaws, and
this is certainly represented by the obvious “cuteness” of skunk fursonas. Skunks
described the same adolescent struggles as other furries. They described the same torment
from bullies, teachers, and judgmental kids as other interviewees. Skunks have reacted to
this torment by acknowledging their own shortcomings and demonstrating their positive 
traits in spite of them.

Another difference between skunks and other species is that skunks are often purely female. Whereas fox suits can be either gender, and wolves are exclusively masculine, skunk suits and fursonas often contain distinctly female accessories such as bows, ribbons, dresses, makeup, etc. Many skunks are also purely female (receptive) during sex, and I was informed early on that they were highly prized by wolves. One interviewee was part of a wolf-skunk pairing, and expressed that this sort of pairing was extremely common.

There is another somewhat prevalent type of fur suit, though this category isn’t defined by species so much as by age. Furries who comprise this category are called “baby furs,” and these furries wear diapers, bottles, and other childhood accessories with their suits. The baby fur has completely rejected every facet of adolescence. The baby fur is also sexually submissive, and requires pampering as part of his experience. Interviewees told me shocking stories of baby furs actually using their diapers and being changed by partners. The baby fur, more so than any other category of furry, desires to return to an idealized childhood. Baby furs often suck on pacifiers, are forbidden to drink alcohol, and will sometimes cry if their needs aren’t met. They usually partner with another “grown” furry, and they receive approval and security in the same way a child receives approval from a parent, though there is a pervasive sexual element. According to interviewees, the baby fursona has no virtues other than cuteness and doesn’t exhibit any flaws save those due to age. In literature and in art baby furs are often powerless and are
rescued by older, more powerful fursonas. The self-image of the baby fur is the most
damaged of all. The baby fur needs constant attention and approval as a result.

According to some interviewees, baby furs are attractive due to the complete
tolerating and submissiveness they exhibit towards other fursuiters. The self-loathing of
baby fur interviewees was extreme. One interviewee referred to himself as a “heifer,” and
frankly stated that he needed constant attention to keep suicidal thoughts at bay. He
described the other baby furs in his “play group” as also needing constant attention, even
blaming them for being “attention whores.” This individual would often feign illness to
receive attention, and his “dad” was always eager to console him. He was extremely
obese, and according to him he was virtually tortured during adolescence due to his size.
Other kids tortured him both physically and verbally, and he even accused teachers of
brutally mocking him on a regular basis. He also claimed that he did not have a single
friend from the time he was twelve until he joined the fandom. Due to his previous
hardship, this person seemed to go the greatest lengths of all to reinvent his identity and
gain some modicum of intimacy, approval, and belonging.

Fursonas: A Biographical Sketch

The fursona can be understood as a statement about a furry’s self-image as well as
a furry’s experiences with the outside world. As a result, it is incumbent upon us to
examine the fursona in greater detail. The purpose of this section is to construct and
describe a “typical” fursona, if such a broad generalization is permissible. Fursonas are as
varied as furries themselves. However, like their creators they share many common traits
and experiences. These common traits and experiences help us gain a broader
understanding of the fursonas and the fandom as a whole, though we must always recognize that even if most fursonas and furries are represented by our generalizations, there will always be plenty of exceptions.

Fursonas are not merely fictional characters. As icons of self-image, self-esteem, sexuality, and lifestyle, they are inseparably linked to their creators. As a result, I do not want to merely describe what I believe are “typical” fursonas. These descriptions might serve as identifiers. If I were to provide detailed descriptions of actual fursonas, other members of the fandom could identify interviewees as participants in this study. While my fears are perhaps exaggerated, several chairmen of prominent conventions have recently declared a policy of noncooperation with journalists and other information-seekers who have notoriously misrepresented the fandom in the past. This wariness of the outside world is justified due to the mean-spirited attacks of groups like Somethingawful.com, and others who terrorize conventions for their own amusement.

The fursona described below is a composite of the fursonas of interviewees. Both the fursona and the composite fursona creator have been imbued with common characteristics shared by most interviewees and the fursonas of interviewees. This composite fursona is not meant to serve as a blanket description of all fursonas, though it is representative of most. As a result, we can use this composite fursona as a tool for understanding the fursona as a symbol of revitalization.

The first composite, yet representative, fursona was created by an equally composite yet representative furry named “Brad.” Brad was invented to summarize traits commonly shared by fursuiter interviewees. Brad is twenty-six, from a medium-sized city in Michigan, and attends a minimum of two conventions per year. He is a fursuiter, is
officially bisexual (he is aroused by women though all of his recent sexual encounters have been with other male furries), and is an artist. He is currently involved in a semi-serious relationship with another furry, whom we’ll call “Josh.” This relationship is open in the sense that the two members can seek sexual experiences with others, though “emotional” attachment is specifically reserved for each other. Brad attempted heterosexual relationships in the past but was unsuccessful. He has had sexual encounters with one woman, who, like Brad himself, is significantly overweight (this is prevalent for many furries but is by no means universal. Being underweight is also a feature of many interviewees). This relationship did not develop into a serious partnership, and the woman cheated on Brad despite the lavish attention he paid her. He is somewhat misogynistic as a result. To Brad, women are shallow, intellectually inferior, and superficial. Despite his bisexuality, Brad also has a negative view of mainstream gay men, whom he regards as obsessed with appearances and intolerant of body styles that differ from conventional gay standards. He is a computer technician by trade, and is extremely interested in science-fiction literature, movies, and television. He lives with two other young men in a city near his birthplace, and spends at least an hour a day in furry-related chats or on art sites.

Brad’s fursona is an anthropomorphic fox called “Raz,” short for “RazorFox.” Raz is a criminal in the sense that he breaks the law for a living, but can more accurately be labeled a “good thief” who answers only to his own conscience. He exists in a sci-fi universe and pilots a spaceship. He is frequently pursued by space-wolves who serve the authorities in this universe, and lives by stealing, raiding, and helping lost souls. He punishes evil-doers without hesitation, and adheres to his own draconian code of morality
without wavering. His entire family was killed by the wolves. He is currently involved in
a relationship with a female skunk (his partner’s fursona), who is adept at
swordsmanship. The two are often represented in drawings. Some drawings contain
action and violence. Others portray the couple engaged in graphic sexual situations. Both
Brad and Josh own fur suits which represent these fursonas and both engage in sexual
activities while wearing them.

How is Raz a statement about Brad? Well for starters both Brad and his fursona
have had the shared experience of being condemned by society at large. Raz’s entire
family was killed while Raz was still a child. His life is a constant attempt to flee from
the same aggressors that killed his family. As a fox living in a world dominated by
wolves and wolf-authority, Raz has rebelled against this establishment by turning to a life
of thievery. Brad also has experienced “being hunted.” Bullies, so-called “jocks,”
women, and other perceived aggressors have continually thwarted his attempts to find
fulfillment in conventional society. Brad has rebelled against this situation by
participating in the fandom, where he has found acceptance and intimacy.

There is also a direct parallel between Brad and his fursona in regards to outlook.
Both Brad and Raz share a draconian belief in the destruction of ignorance and wrong.
Raz and Brad view their enemies as ignorant and entirely wicked, and as a result do not
tolerate them to any degree. Whereas Raz physically destroys these evil-doers with
violence, Brad also attacks mundanes with socially-darwinistic statements condemning
them as ignorant, prejudiced fools. Raz trusts no one save a few close associates and his
partner. Brad shares this mistrust of society at large and exclusively seeks true
companionship in the fandom.
Raz is also sexually empowered. He is a dominant, sexually aggressive figure in the “yiffy” works drawn by Brad. He has engaged in rape, though he prefers intimacy with his skunk partner. Raz’s genitals are huge and his ability to keep his partners satisfied is evidenced by the expressions of pleasure and sexual compulsion that are key features of yiff art. Brad has also found sexual empowerment in the fandom. This empowerment is represented by the sexual exploits of Raz, which Brad often acts out in his fur suit. While wearing his fur suit, Brad is sexually desirable to Josh, and the two engage in sexual role-playing that fulfills the needs of both individuals. Brad feels in control and is able to gratify himself. It is important to note that both Raz and Brad only find fulfillment through Brad’s partner. Raz is only truly emotionally and sexually satisfied when he is with Josh’s skunk fursona and Brad finds fulfillment with Josh. Both Brad and Raz are denied access to outside relationships and both are at odds with society at large. The fur suit and fursona are tools through which Brad can reinvent himself and participate in a lifestyle that validates him. He gains sexual empowerment, emotional intimacy, and status whenever he emulates Raz, who represents what Brad is attempting to become by participating in the fandom.

There is also another therapeutic component to Brad’s creation of Raz. Raz is powerful in combat. The forces that assail him, which can be understood as symbols of Brad’s own personal foes, are routinely frustrated in their attempts to destroy Raz. When Brad draws images of Raz in combat, or when he role-plays or writes out these violent scenes, Brad is in effect lashing out at perpetrators in his own life. The wolves are militarily powerful, sexually promiscuous, athletic, and socially accepted. They mock
Raz despite Raz’s undeniable abilities and worth. By creating situations in which Raz destroys his foes, Brad successfully lashes out at his own perceived oppressors.

Raz is also very similar to Brad in regards to social life. He is by nature a loner. He has very few, if any, trusted allies (other than his partner) and generally looks on society itself as intrinsically evil. Before meeting his partner (and before Brad met Josh), Raz spent most of his free time alone on far away planets or on his ship. Completely detached from friends and family, Raz is troubled by the negative nature of his past, which haunts him. Brad is also troubled by this mostly negative past life, and though his parents might still be present in his life, he feels they don’t understand him and fears he will be separated from them once he reveals his status as a fursuiter. Brad has very few close friends and acquaintances outside the fandom. Raz’s isolation is analogous to Brad’s.

Brad is not the only furry engaged in the reinvention of self, nor is he typical of every fursuiter who has created a fursona. However, he is typical of the majority of fursuiters, and Raz is typical of a majority of fursonas. The vast majority of non-fursuiters also create fursonas, and these fursonas exhibit many of the same traits as the fursonas of fursuiters. There is, however, one subtle difference between the fursonas of fursuiters and others. This is a difference of degree, however, and not of kind. Non-fursuiters are more likely to create fursonas that are less fleshed-out than the fursonas of fursuiters, and are likely to spend less time engaged in role-play. Non-fursuiter interviewees did engage in some role-play, and most also enjoyed some form of yiff featuring their fursonas in sexual situations. However, many non-fursuiters expend less energy in the fandom in general, and as a result their fursonas are somewhat less detailed
and less essential to their own identities than those of fursuiters. It is now necessary to summarize what was described above.

One common trait shared by most fursonas (including those of non-fursuiters), is the presence of a fulfilling and empowered sex life. The fursona is what most furries feel they are not, or were not in a past life. A fursona is desired for both physical beauty as well as personality. Nearly every fursona represented in art has idyllic sex organs, such as large penises, testicles, and well-formed breasts. The fursona is most often muscular, toned, and athletic. The fursona is dominant in every situation, and during sex the fursona is aggressive, imposing, and voracious. The fursona is in control of sex in a way that the furry is not.

Another common trait in the lives of fursonas is the presence of adventurous or violent activity. Fursonas are much more likely to be warriors, pirates, wizards, gunfighters, martial arts masters, and other physically aggressive archetypes than they are to work a nine-to-five job in a retail outlet. The fursona inhabits a world that is full of excitement. In the life of virtually every fleshed-out fursona, there are villains that mirror the villains of the creators’ pasts. These villains are slaves to conformity. They are superficial, prejudiced, intolerant, and lacking in compassion. The fursona, as an idealized self-image, is mightier than these villains, and often slays them with vengeful impunity.

A draconian outlook is also a key feature of most fursonas. Like Raz, many fursonas have the black and white views of their creators. This outlook is unforgiving of mundanes and those who are intolerant of any aspect of the fandom. Furries express a decidedly-“dog-eat-dog” view of society and humanity, almost certainly due to the
mistreatment they received as adolescents. Many fursonas have also been abused in some way. They are also more geared towards punishment than mercy.

One final trait shared by most fursonas is that fursonas are often involved in relationships with the fursonas of other furries. Furries do create mates for their own fursonas, but this is less common than one would think. Fursonas mirror the sex lives of their creators in that the lover of the furry often provides a lover for that furry’s fursona. For example, if two fursuiters meet at a convention (this is largely true of non-fursuiters also) and hit it off, their two fursonas will become lovers in a fictional universe and this relationship will last as long as the relationship of the two furries.
CHAPTER IV
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONCLUSION

Historical Development

Intellectually-inclined furries will be quick to point out that “anthropomorphism,” as they define it, has a long history that transcends time, geography, and culture. From their point of view, the central themes of the furry fandom have existed in some form for thousands of years. Though the advent of the fandom is certainly a modern (more appropriately “post-modern”) phenomenon, the use of animals as symbols for cultural revitalization is as ancient as culture itself. Throughout history human beings have used animals as expressions of their own greatness and also as symbols of the flaws of others.

When one contemplates the use of animals as totems, examples such as the indigenous cultures of North and South America come to mind. The Aztec veneration of the eagle, for example, is also a statement about the prowess of the Aztec empire. When Aztec and other indigenous warriors donned the skins of animals it was intended not only as a means of frightening the enemy, but also as a statement about the ferocity of the warriors themselves. Indigenous peoples are not the only ones who have used animals as symbols for revitalization. In Christianity and Islam, the dove is a symbol of divinity, and its supposedly peaceful nature and purity make a statement about a divine being. In the middle ages, heraldry also contained animals that represented the status and abilities of
noblemen. The lion of the house of Plantagenet, for example, exemplified the supposed strength of the English royal dynasty at the time. One of its most famous sons, Richard I, was lauded as having the “Coeur De Lyon,” or “Lionheart.” Other medieval uses of zoomorphic or “anthropomorphic” symbolism include the depictions of certain saints (such as the Byzantine depiction of St. Christopher as having the head of a dog), the imperial German eagle (which would later be resurrected by Hitler as a symbol of Nazism), and the ancient practice of representing Christ as a lamb in painting and sculpture.

This use of animal symbolism continued through the enlightenment into the modern era. One example of this is the debate of the founding fathers over the national bird. Benjamin Franklin wanted the symbol of the young republic to be a turkey. This was a matter of contention, and ultimately an eagle (perceived as a symbol of freedom) was chosen. Animals are not only used to glorify certain aspects of culture, however. Nazi propagandists frequently employed rats as symbols for Jews during the anti-Semitic atrocities of the mid-twentieth century. In Bram Stoker’s gothic novel, Dracula, the vampire could transform himself into a bat or wolf, and both symbolized his evil and rapacity.

Animal symbolism is also a frequent feature in modern English. When an individual is accused of being dishonest, he or she is often called a “snake in the grass,” and might have a “forked tongue.” Older people might encourage good behavior by asking children to “be a lamb.” There are instances of animal symbolism in language that are more suited to our purposes. If a woman is attractive, she might be labeled a “fox,” and sexually aggressive men are often labeled as “tigers” or “wolves.” Animal
symbolism has infiltrated culture and continues to be an effective method of description. Thus we can understand the furry desire to use animal symbolism to glorify the self as the continuation of much older practices.

The history of the fandom itself is somewhat confusing. It is the result of a wide variety of influences, events, and individuals. Like many cultural developments, the fandom has no absolute starting date. There are claims regarding the first convention, but most interviewees acknowledged older cartoons, such as those of Warner Bros. and others, as “furry.” The fandom is the result of various other fandoms, which ultimately coalesced into what we now call furry. Though the history of the fandom is largely unknown even to furries, I can identify three major cultural influences that underlie the development of the subculture. These influences are the development of children’s cartoons and the impact of these cartoons on future furries, the rise of Star Trek and other science fiction conventions, and the artwork of Robert Crum, particularly “Fritz the Cat.”

The baby boom of the mid twentieth-century resulted in both more children and more wealth for the average American household. The introduction of the television into the homes of millions of Americans also meant more entertainment for the millions of children born in the post-war years. A good part of this children’s entertainment consisted of “Saturday morning” cartoons, which culminated in a veritable ritual for American young people. These cartoons would eventually become a major part of many children’s lives, and these cartoons are one pillar on which the furry fandom rests. During the late 1970’s and 1980’s many toys were based on these cartoons, and the entire process became an entrenched part of American culture. This is significant in that the vast majority of furries were children during this time. Interviewees desired to discuss their
favorite cartoon characters in detail. The overwhelming majority of them described this period of their lives as a virtual golden age in which the characters on the screen were “best friends,” as one interviewee put it. These cartoons had a deep, psychological impact on furries. Many of these cartoons contained anthropomorphic creatures, and this is one way in which anthropomorphism was transmitted to future furries. Cartoons were succeeded by video games, in which individuals not only watched characters they perceived as empathetic, understanding, virtuous, and powerful, but also acted out chapters of these characters’ lives. A particularly popular genre among furries is the “RPG,” or role-playing game, in which players live out the lives of fantasy characters and control their attributes and development. Through these games, furries continued to build on their affinity for cartoons. The games provided furries with an outlet in which they could be empowered, have status, and affect the world around them. This contrasted sharply with the real world, in which many interviewees were subjected to harassment and even torture. Cartoon themes, and the video games which they spawned, explain part of the origins of the furry movement, in that they undergird later practices.

The second major influence on the development of the fandom was the convention itself. Political and social conventions have been a feature of American life since colonial times. Members of political parties, veterans, religious denominations, and other cultural bodies have held conventions for decades and even centuries. In the late twentieth century, however, a different type of convention developed. Rather than having a social or political agenda, these conventions were largely gatherings of people who had shared interests in certain aspects of popular culture. One popular convention was (and still is) the Star Trek convention. Based on the science fiction drama *Star Trek*, these
conventions contain many of the same elements of furry conventions. There is an emphasis on original fan art and costumes. According to one interviewee and long time furry, the furry fandom was originally created by “people too ------ up to be trekkies,” and he cites these conventions as the origin of contemporary furry conventions. According to “A Chronology of Furry Fandom” (Fadden, Yarf.Furry.Com), it was during a related science fiction convention called “NorEasCon II World Science Fiction Convention,” held in Boston in 1980, that an artist named Steve Gallaci displayed the first modern furry art work. According to Fadden, this attracted other like-minded individuals and soon the “Gallaci group” began to stage regular meetings. These meetings eventually developed into the modern furry convention, the official first of which is considered by most furries to be “Confurence,” which was held in California in 1990. Though beginning as an art movement, the practice of wearing costumes began to be disseminated from other fandoms. According to an interviewee, these proto-furries eventually began to consort with each other instead of the more “mainline” trekkies. These proto-furries began to grow in numbers, and hostility between them and other trekkies began to develop. Proto-furries ultimately completely split from Star Trek conventions, holding gatherings first in private homes. Nevertheless, there are multiple emic accounts of the first convention, none of which appear credible to me. Since this is a paper about revitalization, and the history exists mainly to provide a backdrop for this study of revitalization, the veracity of these claims is largely irrelevant.

What is certain is that in the beginning, furry conventions were not sexual in nature. This is reiterated time and again by emic sources, and longtime furries unanimously agree. In the beginning, role-playing was the central focus of conventions,
and though sexual encounters might have occurred, erotic art was not emphasized any more than at other, unrelated conventions. The majority of furries who were fursuiters were not inclined toward homosexual sex, and the proportion of bisexual and homosexual men, at least according to interviewees, was nowhere near as large as it is today.

This all changed in the mid-nineties. The introduction of anime, a style of cartoon developed in Japan, and the adult cartoons that sprang from it (called “hentai”), coincided with an increased emphasis on sexuality in the fandom. One can’t discuss the furry fandom accurately without discussing anime. Anime developed in Japan after World War Two, and many anime cartoons contain adult themes such as explicit violence and sex. These cartoons enabled future furries to maintain their childhood interest in animation despite the development of puberty, and interest in anime was prevalent during the teenage years of interviewees. Anime provided future furries with a template on which their own sexual fantasies could be based; many anime characters even have animal parts, such as tails and ears. The sexual features of women in anime are blatantly exaggerated. Cute, big eyes, oversized breasts, skimpy or provocative clothing, youthful naivety, and a ditzy disposition are frequent features of female anime characters. These women often have absurdly powerful abilities, such as magic powers, martial arts skills, etc, and in this regard they mirror fursonas almost to a tee. The anime female is powerful, sexually attractive, and unthreatening and this provided a basis for the later sexual icons of the fandom.

With the widespread development of sexual cartoons, the furry fandom began to develop as a sexual subculture. According to an interviewee, it was in the mid-nineties that individuals seeking sex began to “pour in like a flood.” Fursonas, which had always
had an element of sexuality, began to be more frequently displayed in pornographic comics and images. Conventions began to become centers of sexual activity. As a result of this change, a backlash occurred. Individuals who labeled themselves “The Burned Furs,” began to argue against the increasingly sexual nature of the fandom, attacking the art and the activities of other furries. This faction was in part incensed by the bad publicity the fandom was receiving from outsiders. According to interviewees, many burned furs were also “old school,” and were less tolerant of homosexual activity in general. This backlash created a climate of division and debate, but eventually dissipated as the situation proved irreversible. The Burned Fur controversy has largely died out and, according to interviewees, many burned furs conceded defeat or left the fandom entirely. Part of this was due to the efforts of so-called “Freezing Furs,” who charged burned furs with attempting to impose censorship and trying to state dictatorially what the fandom was all about.

Another primary influence on the development of the fandom is the artwork of Robert Crumb. His character, “Fritz the Cat,” paved the way for the development of erotic, anthropomorphic art. Robert Crumb created a world in which characters reminiscent of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck engaged in extremely explicit sexual acts and, though he has achieved a certain level of respect in the art world, many conservatives would no doubt label his work as pure pornography. In regards to the fandom, however, the introduction of Fritz the Cat into American culture is vital. To older interviewees, it is the first known instance of anthropomorphic cartoons, and the fact that the development of the fandom succeeds Crumb’s supposed “masterpiece” is no coincidence. One interviewee described the effect that reading Crumb’s comics had on
his own fursona for an entire half-hour, lauding the free-wheeling sex life of Fritz and
discussing the ways in which his fursona was similarly roguish and sexually-liberated.
Fritz was charismatic, unafraid, and detached from the miserable conditions around him.
In this regard, Fritz was the first true fursona.

All of these various influences combined to produce what we now know as the
furry fandom. As a result we can understand the furry fandom as a synthesis of different
ideas and perspectives, all of which ultimately seek to escape from a reality in which
individuals are marginalized and discriminated against. The fandom, like the art and
counterculture that spawned it, is a reaction against the limits placed on people due to a
variety of factors. Generally possessing above average intelligence and a deep sensitivity
to perceived wrongs, furries have used these influences to construct a world in which
they can feel accepted.

Epilogue

I was introduced to the fandom by a good friend who regularly scours the Internet
for the next “Internet phenomenon.” Through him I had the good fortune of being
introduced to several popular furries, some of which could be said to have “celebrity”
status in the community. These furries were keen to introduce me to the fandom, and I
found that furries are generally eager to bond with strangers and to share their subculture
with the uninitiated. I quickly discerned that furries possessed a degree of toleration and
permissiveness I had never before encountered. I was able to joke with furries and I
developed respect and empathy for informants. This friendly attitude was also present
during the interview process. Interviewees were open and honest, and I have tried to
repay that honesty by ensuring their privacy and anonymity. I also want to repay their cooperation by portraying the fandom in an objective light. Interviewees often volunteered information upon discovering that I was doing research, and I’m very grateful to have received so much assistance.

With that said, there is one final aspect of the fandom that I would like to discuss, despite the fact that it is a taboo subject for many interviewees. Some furries (though not a majority) contend with a level of guilt that would shame any medieval penitent. This feature of the subculture is as pervasive as it is destructive. Some furries don’t just glorify their participation in the fandom. Some also seem to regret it. Furries do establish friendships, sexual relationships, and new identities that enable them to feel more secure. However, the process of revitalization is far from complete, and a good portion of interviewees, even those who were interviewed informally, expressed a degree of self-loathing that I have never before witnessed. This self-loathing is endemic in the fandom and for some individuals the degree of self-loathing is generally proportional to the level of participation. Fursuiters generally express the most self-loathing, with those who intend to build or purchase fur suits not far behind. One informant mournfully asked me, “How ------ up can people be?” Needless to say it was not my place as ethnographer to impose any kind of moral judgment on research subjects. If the revitalization process was in the end successful, perhaps this question would be unnecessary. Unfortunately for some furries, they cannot truly escape the stigma of their pasts and, when push comes to shove, they seem to rail against the subculture they have attempted to find meaning in.

Furries write their own mythology. This is part and parcel of what being “furry” is all about. It is a conscious effort to change how individuals view themselves and a
deliberate attempt to rework reality so that individuals can experience belonging, affection, and empowerment. Unfortunately, by writing their own mythology some furries ultimately engage in their most extreme act of self-loathing of all. By denying the sexual aspect of the fandom, they essentially condemn it. For all the talk of tolerance (and even the extreme demonstration of it), many furries still want to believe that the subculture is not defined to a large degree by sexuality. This is evident when one examines the massive amount of emic sources published online. There have been instances where I have read statements about the “true purpose” of the fandom, clicked on the writer’s art page, and ended up being taken to his giant collection of “furry porn.” Even some interviewees at first denied the sexual nature of the fandom. When they became more comfortable with the interview process, they became more eager to talk about the sexual elements of the fandom. Later on some of these interviewees expressed their hatred of themselves and their sexual behaviors. Some were more honest from the get-go, but the self-loathing remained. The desire to distance themselves from the reality of the fandom is due primarily to their rejection of it.

For many the process of revitalization only seems to postpone the need for individuals to deal with their pasts, and often compounds the problem by introducing a new source of guilt. The emic analysis of so many informants and interviewees justifies this conclusion. When one examines an indigenous people, one discovers a “mazeway” which is to a certain extent perceived as natural by informants. Though people in every culture can experience self-loathing, I gathered the notion that some furries were not convinced of the benefits or “naturalness” of their chosen subculture. To the contrary, some described it as an aberration. It is this self-loathing, emic condemnation of the
fandom that served as the impetus for the divisive experience surrounding the burned furs movement. As a result, I am not certain that the fandom will last, despite the current trend of growth.

Furry attitudes vary from the belief that sexuality plays no role in the fandom to the belief that no one ever attends a convention for any purpose other than to engage in fur suit sex. Of course, neither of these perceptions represents the whole story, as I have explained. Sex is a major part of the fandom. Sex is also a major part of human culture.

The effects of the burned furs controversy have taken a heavy toll on the subculture. Members of the fandom have suffered due to the negative press, the stereotyping, and the public humiliation by journalists and others whose sole goal is to mock furries for amusement and shock value. The desire to prevent this mockery is understandable, considering how much people invest in the fandom. However, many furries have adopted the burned furs perspective in order to prevent this mockery and have as a result isolated a large chunk of the population.

In my opinion, the truth of the matter is that sexuality, as an aspect of human culture, is ultimately part of the revitalization process of the fandom. This is not to say that every individual involved in the fandom is in agreement with fursuiters or owns a suit with a “strategically placed hole.” However, these features are present, prevalent, and cannot be ignored in an objective portrayal of the fandom. There are, of course, individuals who attend conventions, draw a few pictures, drink with friends, and return to their everyday lives with a renewed sense of happiness. There are also individuals who engage in sexual activities with stuffed animals.
If I had to explain the furry fandom to someone who had no idea of what it was, I’d tell him or her that it is analogous to a night club. When individuals patronize a night club, they do so for a variety of reasons. Some come to meet friends. Some come to enjoy music. Some come to drink. A large number come to meet potential sex partners. This doesn’t mean that night clubs are “all about sex.” Of course, the real issue with detractors is not the amount of sexual activities and art in the fandom. A good chunk of the world’s total internet output is probably centered on pornography. The presence of pornography and sex at conventions isn’t causing the controversy. It’s the nature, not the prevalence, of the erotic art and furry sexuality that raises eyebrows. For most anti-furries, it’s the fursonas, the fur suits, and the “furversion” that ultimately condemns the fandom.

By emphasizing anthropomorphic eroticism, furries are essentially making a bold claim, i.e. that they find half-human, half-animal hybrids attractive. By wearing fur suits during sexual activities, most fursuiters are making the claim that they wish to have sex in a manner that simulates and commemorates these hybrids. This is what outsiders find shocking. The fandom is ultimately left with two options. The first is to minimize the sexual aspects of anthropomorphic culture and the second is to come to terms with the reality of it. Other fandoms have sexual elements, and yet don’t get harassed by groups such as those that wish furries harm. What these other groups lack is not an emphasis on sexuality, but an emphasis on anthropomorphic identity. It is part of what being furry is all about that is causing the controversy.

I’ve attempted to write an objective thesis on the fandom. Still, there is the possibility of bias, as with any study. As a community under siege, the furry fandom is in a precarious and insecure state. As a result there is a heightened level of sensitivity
regarding outside views on the fandom. I’ve attempted to write the truth as I see it based on interview data, observation, art analysis, and an examination of online literature. There will no doubt be contention in the community regarding my findings. One of the fursuiter interviewees instructed me to “Try this on for size. Question everything.” I expect that my findings will be met with the same questioning spirit. After all, this study doesn’t represent the “truth.” It represents the truth as I believe it to be. Hopefully this study will serve as a guide for future research. It’s the first of its kind, and I would invite anyone interested to seriously examine the fandom from an anthropological standpoint.

My study was designed to present an overall picture of the furry fandom, how it functions as a sub-culture, and how individuals reinvent themselves as a part of the overall process. As a result, I’ve neglected certain themes due to the constraints of this study. There is not to my knowledge any qualitative, etic study of the fandom to compare this paper to. More research needs to be conducted on the overall subculture, in order to provide the academic world with a means of comparison.

There are several key aspects of the fandom that I could not examine due to time and other constraints. One is the role of women in the fandom. There is a paucity of female participants in my study. One reason for this could be that when I conducted my initial survey there were few women to establish a rapport with. Another reason could be that female furries might be less inclined to share their stories with a male anthropologist. Another could be that since my initial informants were male, they introduced me primarily to male furries. It has also not been practical for me to do so, considering the vastness of the subculture. Due to time and financial constraints, some elements of the
subculture had to be set aside. Nevertheless, the minority of female furries is growing, and this aspect of the fandom needs to be examined in detail.

The second aspect that needs to be addressed is the presence of spirituality. Some interviewees expressed spiritual connections to their fursonas. Since this wasn’t one of the more prevalent features of interviewees, I decided to omit any detailed discussion of furry spirituality due to time constraints. Further research needs to be conducted in this area.

The third aspect of the fandom that needs to be examined is the growth of the fandom in Europe. Though it is still primarily an American subculture, European furries are beginning to organize, as evidenced by the existence of Eurofurence, which is held in Germany. Travel expenses prevented me from placing too much emphasis on these European furs, but it is my hope that Europeans and others will conduct further research on this topic.

In conclusion, I’d like to extend my thanks to all the interviewees who made this possible, as well as to the rest of the furs who were willing to share their time and stories with an outsider. It is my sincere hope that some light has been shed on this fascinating topic.
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