<u>Fursonas: Furries, Community, and Identity Online</u>

Ben Silverman

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES/WRITING
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MAY 2020

Signed:

_____

Ben Silverman

_____

Ian Condry
Professor, Anthropology and Comparative Media Studies/Writing
Thesis Advisor

_____

Eric Klopfer
Director of Graduate Studies, Comparative Media Studies/Writing

Fursonas:
Furries, Community, and Identity Online

By

Ben Silverman

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies/Writing on May 8, 2020 in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Comparative Media
Studies

ABSTRACT

The furry fandom is a loose-knit online subculture of fans devoted to anthropomorphic animal
characters. Furries are not necessarily fans of specific media properties, but instead often create
their own media, including the "fursona," an anthropomorphic animal character to represent
oneself in the community. Conducting empirical research through interviews, participant-
observation, autoethnography, and virtual ethnography, I have sought to understand this aspect of
furry identity and sociality through a number of disciplinary lenses.

In this thesis, I argue that furry queers fandom through several interrelated processes: severing
fandom from textual objects; developing queer sex publics; paving new pathways to queer
becoming; and displacing online identity through stylized, affective modes of embodiment. These
fan practices, as articulated through the fursona, cohere into a queer worlding of virtual spaces.

Thesis Supervisor: Ian Condry
Title: Professor of Comparative Media Studies/Writing
Professor of Anthropology

Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Chapter 1. Furry Queers Fandom

The furry fandom is a loose-knit subculture of fans devoted to anthropomorphic animal characters. Initially a tiny outgrowth of the science fiction and underground comix communities of the late 1970s, furry has grown into a massive affinity group with a membership estimated in the hundreds of thousands, primarily spread via the Internet. Furries are not necessarily fans of specific media properties, but instead often create their own media. Typically, furries will create a "fursona" (a portmanteau of "furry" and "persona"), an anthropomorphic animal character to represent themselves in the community. Furry fandom is now primarily an online subculture, and while that is where my research focuses, furries also meet up in person at furry conventions, wherein makers sell their wares, artists take commissions, and furry costumers (fursuiters) wear their fursuits freely. Conducting empirical research through interviews, participant-observation, and virtual ethnography, I have sought to understand one aspect of furry identity and sociality—the fursona—under a number of disciplinary lenses. In this thesis, I argue that furry *queers* fandom through several interrelated processes: severing fandom from textual objects; developing queer sex publics; paving new pathways to queer becoming; and displacing online identity through stylized, affective embodiment and virtual worlding.

In Chapter 1, I provide a historical perspective on the furry fandom. This is necessary to situate my ethnographic work, which focuses on the fursona in the contemporary moment, within a longer and broader continuum of subcultural practices. I also introduce the argument that *furry queers fandom* by dislocating its bond to discrete textual objects; a move that requires a rethinking of the assumptions upon which the discipline of fandom studies fundamentally rests. In this chapter, I also discuss the "furry sex wars" and the ways in which furry fandom has come to constitute a

queer sex public; a contested designation that, I argue, is essential to furry's queering project. In Chapter 2, I present the results of my ethnographic work regarding the early stages of a furry's entry into the fandom. This includes pre-furry encounters with animals and media, discoveries of the online furry mediascape, and the process and social negotiations of developing a fursona. These stages constitute a mode of "queer becoming" centered on the virtual body, accomplished through an undoing of the distinction between virtual and real affection and a consciously collaborative process of identity formation. In Chapter 3, I discuss my ethnographic work around the everyday uses of the fursona—politics, art, sex, and more—and the messy affective relations that these uses engender. These messy relations, I argue, cohere into a "queer worlding" of virtual spaces. Finally, in Chapter 4, I conclude with some brief notes on my experiences and discuss future directions for the study of furry fandom.

This ethnographic work is, in part, an autoethnography. Prior to officially beginning fieldwork, I had already accumulated over a decade of experience in the furry fandom. I have been interested in furry art since around 2006, when I was 12 years old, and I have considered myself a furry since around 2012, when I was 18. The furry identity began to resonate with me at this time as I began to meet and befriend a number of furries online through Tumblr, a popular social blogging site, and FurAffinity, a furry art gallery website. In this period, I also created a fursona, along with a handle that I began to use publicly on social media.[1] Since then, I have been to nearly a dozen furry conventions, spent countless hours on various instant messengers and social media platforms, and built a flourishing social life around my furry acquaintances. This experience both inspires and greatly informs my research. More recently, in an official fieldwork capacity, I have conducted formal interviews with several friends and acquaintances (hereafter "informants" or "interlocutors")[2] and have been further guided by many informal conversations since beginning

this thesis project in late 2018. When quoting directly from text-based conversations, I have made an effort to reproduce typographical idiosyncrasies faithfully, inserting parentheticals only when necessary for clarification.

The ethnographic methods employed in this project are informed by my prior ethnographic work regarding a music filesharing network and BitTorrent tracker, which I conducted during my undergraduate studies from 2016–18 (Silverman 2018). I also model my methodology on the work of Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor in their *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. My virtual field sites are a loose collection of social media, other websites, and instant messenger group chats, which do not meet all of the criteria of "virtual worlds" as laid out in Boellstorff et al.: "virtual worlds are [...] *places* and have a sense of *worldness* [, …] multi-user in nature: they exist as shared social environments with synchronous communication and interaction [, …] *persistent*: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off [, … and] allow participants to *embody* themselves, usually as avatars," (2012: 7). My field sites are instead typically conceived of as platforms. They are not virtual geographies or "places" in any traditional sense; they do not have interactable objects; communication is typically asynchronous; and embodiment is performed without strict regulation or standardization, unlike most virtual worlds. However, I argue that furries perform a sort of "virtual worlding"—adapted from Martin Manalansan's (2015) "queer worlding," wherein queer folks carve out messy spaces inside heteronormative society to claim as their own worlds. Furries conceptualize art gallery websites like FurAffinity as *places* that they have visited and perhaps lived for a time, certainly a *shared* and *persistent* social environment, allowing for *embodiment* through the fursona (conceptually, if not technologically, embodied). I will expand on this concept in the third chapter of this thesis.

Regardless, even if we do not accept those parameters, the methodologies of Boellstorff et al. are equally valid for virtual non-worlds and non-places.

Evaluation of Existing Literature

I am not the first academic to turn a scholarly gaze upon the furry fandom. In the earliest example I could locate, performance scholar Marla Carlson (2011) writes for *Theatre Journal* of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "becoming-animal" as exemplified in what she calls the "as-animal performance" of furries, particularly those who perform in body modification. Carlson's primary furry subject is Stalking Cat, a furry famous for his elaborate piercings and tattoos worn to resemble a cat; Carlson also undertakes some field research at a furry convention and speaks to fursuiters. Her primary argument is that as-animal performance blurs boundaries between species, reflecting a desire to eliminate them entirely (which, she argues, is also reflected in "ethical performances" with companion species and autistic people "performing human"). Carlson writes about furries as an outsider, and her fieldwork seems a self-admitted dead end for her own analysis: she concludes that furries seek "a sort of engagement with *humans* that animal masquerade frees them to experience," (2011: 198, emphasis in original) and that "the primary affinity for many furries is, in fact, to cartoons" (202) as opposed to real animals. Moreover, as I will make clear in the next chapter regarding "queer becoming" (wherein I draw from queer scholars who, in turn, cite Deleuze), the "as-" of Carlson's "as-animal performance" neglects the teleological, process-oriented work that "becoming" does. Overall, Carlson's engagement with furries seems limited both by a lack of insider voices and an apparent lack of fit of fieldwork data to the "as-animal performance" conceptualization.

A second scholar who has written about furry subjects is anthropologist Devin Proctor, who published the results of his ethnographic research in Facebook-based Otherkin communities in the STS journal *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* in 2018. Otherkin is not the same thing as furry; Proctor defines Otherkin as "people who sincerely identify, on some level, as other-than-human" (2018: 485), and his project focuses on therians, or Otherkin who identify specifically as non-human animals. There are many Otherkin and therians who are also furries—including one of my interlocutors, KK, who "started out in the whole therian/lycanthrope fandom thing," but ultimately found those groups "too serious" and was drawn the more playful nature of furry. That perceived seriousness may be a result of the processes described in Proctor's research, which centers on practices of scientific reasoning and boundary work in Otherkin groups on Facebook. Proctor's work is a result of five years of participant-observation by an outsider; he describes himself as a "non-kin anthropologist" (491). He argues that Otherkin seek to validate their identity through the "construction of scientistic selves," in other words, using concepts and language from scientific discourse; as well as through "policing the fluff," in other words, ingroup/outgroup boundary work that defines who is and is not valid Otherkin. Though it is ultimately somewhat removed from furry, there are resonant pieces within Proctor's work on Otherkin: the development of a fursona is a self-fashioning of identity with its own norms and politics; and boundary work around sexuality has been a continual source of strife in furry fandom, as I will explore with the "furry sex wars" below. My work can comfortably be situated alongside Proctor's, and more detailed comparison between the two groups would likely prove fruitful.

A third site of peer-reviewed scholarly work on furries is the prolific output of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP), also known as FurScience, which is comprised primarily of social psychologists Sharon Roberts, Courtney "Nuka" Plante, Kathy

Gerbasi, and Stephen Reysen. The IARP primarily conducts social psychological surveys at furry conventions and has published over 30 articles and book chapters, and the findings from their first five years are summarized in the book *FurScience* (Plante et al. 2016), which collects and visualizes the results of surveys from 2011 through 2015. Based on a sampling of about 15 papers I was able to access, these consist almost entirely of reports on their survey results. Their research process roughly follows a formula: first, they develop a hypothesis about attitudes and perceptions among furries based on prior research; then, they distribute surveys asking for answers to carefully scoped questions to test that hypothesis (along with demographic questions); then, they perform statistical analysis on the results. There are a few important things to mention about the IARP's work. First, the IARP is set apart from the work of both Carlson and Proctor in two ways: several of the researchers are fandom insiders; and, because their methodology is strictly rooted in the discipline of quantitative social psychology, the IARP's work rarely contains thick description or theoretical interpretation. That is to say that each of their research outputs are so narrowly scoped and systematic that, at least in terms of my research goals, they are not conceptually fruitful. Still, some of the IARP's results are useful for tracking demographics and attitudes, and I will refer to them at times in this thesis.

Several graduate students in other disciplines have also conducted research about furries. One of the first examples of this is anthropologist Chris Seabrook, whose 2010 master's thesis is titled "'It Gives Me Thunder': Reflections on 'Becoming Fur'". Seabrook's work is perhaps overly ambitious, as he takes a "mapping" approach (2010: xii) and thus tries to describe and analyze *all* of furry from a top-down perspective. However, it does lay threads that are worth picking up and continuing, such as the development of furry conlangs (constructed languages; Seabrook 2010: 54–57) and Seabrook's theory of "parodic displacement" in furry pornography (215). Another

example of prior student work is the master's thesis of sociologist Sherry Jeansonne (2012), who also conducts an ethnographic study of (a geographically localized) furry fandom with perhaps an over-broad focus. Jeansonne argues that there are several "types" of furries: artists and art fans, spiritual furries, fursuiters, and those interested in "the sexual aspects" of the fandom. I disagree with the premise that there is a clear distinction between (or even a possible typology of) furries based on discrete motivations for participation—this may be simply reflective of Jeansonne's local scene, but I will argue in this chapter and the next that sexuality and artmaking are important to furry sociality beyond single furries' motivations. Another of Jeansonne's central arguments is that furries dedicate certain time in the day as "fur time," while the rest is spent like non-furries. This may be reflective of a change over the past decade, but this premise similarly chafes against one of my primary findings about the everyday nature of fursona embodiment as explored in Chapter 3. For the third and final master's thesis I will discuss,[3] folklorist Jakob Maase's (2015) anthropological study of fursuiters connects furry tradition-making with folklore studies. Maase argues that furry fandom makes folklore out of popular culture. Maase's work is useful in its detailed portrayal of the intricacies of fursuiting, which I will explore in Chapter 3. However, I do not find the distinctions between "folklore" and "fan lore," or "folk groups" and "subcultures," entirely clear or convincing. Still, the question of appropriate terminology is one that is worth exploring further.

Queering "Fandom"

In the introduction to this chapter I use the words "fandom," "subculture," "affinity group," and "community" to refer to furry. Though each of these terms carries specific connotations that apply to furrydom, none is a perfect fit. Attending to some of these definitions will allow for an

unpacking of how, exactly, furry queers fandom. "Furry fandom" is the common nomenclature among furries, and is the primary name I use in this thesis, but furry does not fit neatly within traditional definitions of media fandom. In defining fandom, media scholars typically assume textual *objects* of fandom situated within mass culture. Henry Jenkins, often cited as the founder of fandom studies, writes that fandoms "relate to the mass media and draw upon it as a resource in their everyday life," though his particular subjects "embraces not a single text or even a single genre but many texts" (1992: 1). Furries certainly relate to mass media and embrace many texts across genres, but unlike Jenkins' subjects, their practices do not strictly resolve around those texts; one need not engage with *any* mass media texts to be a furry fan. Jenkins refers to his subject as "media fandom," and I posit that while furry is inextricably linked to fan cultures (as I will explain in the history section), it is not accurate to call it "media fandom" due to this severing of the tie between fans and media texts.

As a result, I argue that furry fandom *queers* fandom—and here I use "queer" as a verb in the queer theory sense, which means to expose and mutate norms by breaking or resisting them—in that it is not anchored to any particular media property, company, or franchise. Instead, furries create their own characters (often beyond the fursona) and create artworks, costumes, and stories based around those characters. That is not to say that furries are not also often fans of media franchises featuring zoomorphic characters—in fact, this is quite common. As Fred Patten ([1997] 2012) notes, "Disney's *Robin Hood* animated theatrical feature with a funny-animal cast is later named by many furry fans as their earliest-remembered positive influence toward anthropomorphic animals," suggesting that many furries' interests began as a result of consuming cartoon animal media; and indeed, Patten's own illustrated chronology begins with several earlier examples of funny animals in popular media. I will further expand upon this in the second chapter

with my discussion of *moe*. However, in my experience, the majority of furry fandom centers around original content creation, and its vitality is in part due to its lack of reliance on media industry producers. Furries produce, sell, and buy their own media. This is exemplified in the rules for one of the earliest furry archive websites, VCL, which prohibited any fanart outright for fear of copyright violations (VCLWiki contributors 2008). Furry has thrived on original content since its early days, and it has never centered around transformative works.

As recently as 2005, fan scholar Cornel Sandvoss has defined fandom in general as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text," (2005: 8). In Sandvoss's most recent work, however, he qualifies this statement, reflecting on the increasingly unbounded nature of textuality and objects of fandom. Sandvoss writes:

> [Fan] objects are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation, and from which they create meaning in the process of reading. (2017: 32)

This semiotic definition works to generalize the object of fandom, loosening the boundaries for what fan cultures see as texts. Sandvoss still emphasizes the interpretation of signs and symbols *as texts* among fans and centers their meaning-making in practices of *reading*. But rather than bounded works created by authors, Sandvoss defines "texts as frames of realizable meanings that span across single or multiple communicative acts, including visual, sound-based, and written communication" (Sandvoss 2017: 32). Anthropomorphism and animality, the conceptual anchors of furry, may constitute such frames of meaning—and using Sandvoss's definition, we could classify furries as fans who read those concepts as texts. Again, however, furry's meaning-making is not rooted in processes reading and reception. Rather, as I will explain in the remainder of this

thesis, furry is constituted relationally through processes of becoming and worlding. This is how furry queers "fandom," in terms of the way it is defined and articulated academically.

But could one potentially avoid this complication by simply referring to furry as a subculture and not a fandom? Prior scholars have used both terms interchangeably. For example, Carlson writes, "Furry *fandom* emerged as a *subculture* in the 1980s," (Carlson 2011: 195; emphasis mine) without making any distinction between the two terms—but her analysis relies on the latter. Building on Dick Hebdige's seminal 1979 work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Carlson defines subculture as "a form that uses style to figuratively express 'a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives,' (Hebdige 1979: 132)," comparing body modification in the furry fandom with the punk style profiled in Hebdige's book (Carlson 2011: 199). Again, her central argument relies on self-styling as a way to achieve an "as-animal" state, from Deleuze's "becoming-animal," which Deleuze sees as a pathway to alternative configurations of family and society. In making those claims, Carlson employs style as one signifier of a larger subcultural performance.

Important in this definition is not only the idea of style, but also its articulation of a position subordinate to mainstream social relations. That is a contested facet of fandom broadly—as fan scholar Henry Jenkins writes, "maybe there is no typical media consumer against which the cultural otherness of the fan can be located" anymore (Jenkins 2007: 364)—captured in the term "subculture" but not necessarily "fandom." Unlike some more mainstream fandoms, the "cultural otherness" of furry is hardly in dispute. The 2002 internet meme "Geek Hierarchy Flowchart" by Lore Sjöberg places furries at the absolute bottom rung of geek culture, taking up all three of the lowest positions (Sjöberg 2002). As geekdom becomes increasingly embedded in mass culture, furry may be dragged in that direction, but to date it appears to remain on the outskirts. That is to

say, even if "subculture" is not an apt term for some fandoms, it can likely be accurately applied to furries. Still, my advisor Ian Condry questions whether I should use the word "subculture," as it may have the side effect of reifying furry culture as subordinate to the dominant culture. I do not intend to situate furry as truly subordinate (or normatively "worse" than other geekdom for that matter), but rather as *outside* the cultural mainstream, which is important to its queering project. A more accurate term might be something like "outculture," but creating new terminology for that purpose is outside the scope of this thesis. As a result, I will use "(the) furry fandom" as the generic term for furry culture and "subculture" when drawing connections to the idea of subculture more broadly.

One final way of describing the fandom is as a community or affinity group. However, as Seabrook writes, furry exists as a "shifting and changing rhizomatic aggregation rather than as a structured entity with clearly defined borders" (2010: xiii). In other words, there is no geographic or virtual boundary, no formal structure, no decision-making process, and no clear indicator of who qualifies as a furry. Rather, association with furry is relational and reliant on self-identification. As my interlocutor Borges explains:

> "I got into furry art once I learned that they had multilimb[4] porn [and] the boytaur/metabods well was starting to run a little dry. I decided I was a furry (or at least, I became cognizant of the fact) some years later when I realized it was a potential friend circle. I started actually talking to furries and thought 'well I guess this makes me one too.'"

Borges' response is similar to that of many of my informants when discussing how they came to consider themselves "a furry." First, he recalls the initial encounter with furry art or, as is often the case, furry porn. After spending a while as a consumer of artwork and stories, he enters the relational phase wherein he meets and befriends furries. In the third phase, self-identification,

Borges believes that he *must* be a furry because he has begun to structure his social life around furries and the fandom. The ambiguity in his both "deciding" and "becoming cognizant of the fact" that he is a furry demonstrates a queering of essentialist notions of the self that runs through all of furry fandom. There is a pervasive sense that somehow, all furries have both become furries and have always been furries. For this reason, careful attention to identity and processes of becoming are necessary to understand why "community" or "fandom" fail to capture the complete picture of furry.

A History of Furry

Despite my claims in the previous section, one cannot talk about furry without talking about media fandom: the origins of the furry fandom can be traced, in part, to the origins of anime fandom in the United States. In 1977, anime fan Fred Patten organized the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO) in Los Angeles, often cited as the first anime fan club in the country (Annett 2014: 120). Patten would soon be in attendance at the very first furry parties at Worldcon and Westercon science fiction conventions in the early 1980s, where the term "furry" is believed to have been coined. Mark Merlino, another founding member of Patten's Cartoon Fantasy Organization, would go on to organize ConFurence, the first ever dedicated furry convention (Patten [1997] 2012). Fred Patten is probably the foremost furry historian—he was a part of the fandom since the beginning, and until his death in 2018, he worked hard to ensure that furry's early history was not lost to time. He penned two books on the subject (Patten 2014; 2017), wrote a weekly column called "Funny Animals and More" for the Cartoon Research blog for several years, and posted regularly on prominent furry blogs Flayrah and Dogpatch Press. One of the most circulated of these efforts is an "Illustrated Chronology of Furry Fandom" that Patten wrote in 1997 for the Yarf fanzine and

reprinted in 2012 on the Flayrah blog (Patten [1997] 2012). This chronology has proven extremely useful in situating furry culturally and historically. In the brief history that follows, I cite extensively from Patten's writings as well as fandom historian Joe Strike's (2017) book *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture*.

The proto-furry era of the late 70s and early 80s was marked by a split between two camps: the sci-fi and anime fans of the C/FO, and the underground comix artists of *Vootie*. *Vootie*, founded in 1976 in Minneapolis, was an exclusive self-published comix magazine focused on anthropomorphics (or "funny animals") that only allowed its own artists and contributors to receive copies. It styled itself as "the fanzine of the Funny Animal Liberation Front." Crucially, although it was a "fanzine," *Vootie* came from the underground comix world, an artmaking and self-publishing tradition associated with punk and hippie countercultures in the mid-20th century United States. This contrasts starkly with the C/FO, who were primarily fans of mass media properties (often imported from Japan) and organized their activity around these objects. The C/FO folks were media fans; the *Vootie* folks were media producers.[1] *Vootie* lasted about 7 years, ceasing publication in early 1983. I will return to the cessation of *Vootie* later, as it may have been an early example of a fundamental debate in the fandom. The following year, a new zine called *Rowrbrazzle* was founded, and its publication continues to this day. Patten, who himself served as editor in chief from 1989–2005, cites the creation of *Rowrbrazzle* as the waypoint for the beginning of the "furry fandom" as a singular entity—the moment where these two camps coalesced (Patten [1997] 2012). This fusion, the creation myth of furry fandom, may in part explain the origin of the identity as both a "fandom" and a "subculture"—and the tensions arising from that duality. From

---

[1] Of course part of Jenkins' project is to question this distinction, but my point here is that the C/FO was organized around processes of reading and reception of mass media, in contrast with *Vootie* who deliberately created counterculture.

Vootie came countercultural attitudes towards amateur artmaking, co-creation, and sexual liberation; from the C/FO came textual poaching, conventioneering, and *moe* (which I will explain in Chapter 2).

Meanwhile, activity was beginning to spread online. The Tiger's Den BBS was founded by Andre Johnson in Los Angeles during 1982, and by late 1983 it had become almost entirely devoted to furry fandom activity (Patten [1997] 2012). This may well represent the beginning of furry fandom as an online phenomenon. Though BBSes mostly relied on local phone calls, FidoNet "echo networks" such as FurNet allowed users from around the country, and even the world, to dial in by hopping from line to line—though it could take several hours to make long distance trips (Strike 2017). And although the early 80s was the start of the furry fandom proper, it found new audiences in the early 1990s with the advent of text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Dimensions) such as FurryMUCK and Usenet groups such as alt.fan.furry, both founded in 1990 (Patten [1997] 2012). 1990's FurryMUCK, a multiplayer roleplaying world with a furry theme, is thought to be responsible for a major furry boom in the early 1990s, expanding the fandom beyond those already in the know about comic publications such as *Albedo Anthropomorphics* (Strike 2017). 1996's *Furcadia*, a "graphical MUD" (basically an MMORPG), may be equally responsible for rapid expansion. The two roleplaying venues are important waypoints because they demonstrate both a collaborative virtual worlding process, and an orientation towards characters or avatars, beginning to take shape.

At some point during all of this avatar-based activity in the mid-1990s, the term "fursona" became commonplace. It is difficult to trace exactly when this occurred, though I have managed to track down a Usenet posting from 1994 using the word (Lester 1994); here it is surrounded by quotation marks, which suggests that the word may not have achieved a critical mass of popular

usage at that point even within the fandom. The mid-2000s saw the introduction of furry archive websites with social features (friend lists, commenting, favorites) including FurAffinity, InkBunny, and Weasyl; at the same time, web 2.0 giants, particularly those attuned to fandom communities such as DeviantArt and LiveJournal, were aiding in its growth. These websites allowed furries to connect more directly by commenting on each other's artwork and stories, sending private messages, and exchanging instant messenger contact details. The gallery websites centered artmaking as the central practice around which furry fandom is based, as opposed to the roleplaying of the previous generation. They also provided further cross-pollination of ideas from media fandom, due to close contact with fan artists on DeviantArt and fandom/fanfiction communities on LiveJournal.

The crucial inflection point for the fursona's centrality to furry culture may have occurred with the wide adoption of social media platforms Tumblr and Twitter. With these platforms, furries began interacting in daily conversation through their fursonas. Whereas previously a fursona may have appeared as a character in artwork or an icon on a gallery profile, it is now the sole visage through which everyday mundane communication—from the personal to the political—is conducted. And while furry life previously existed separately from the rest of online communication, sequestered in "places" or "worlds" such as Usenet groups and websites like FurAffinity, it is now entangled with the full breadth of social interactions taking place on massive social media platforms. I see this as a shift in furry fandom from a focus on "places" to "people," that is, individuals or tight-knit circles of friends who interact on social media.

This shift also coincided with an exponential uptick in the growth of the furry fandom, though this is difficult to measure due to the fragmented and decentralized nature of furry fandom on social media platforms. One metric we could use to measure the growth of the furry fandom is

convention attendance. According to contributors to the wiki-style website Wikifur, the largest

furry convention in the year 2000 was Anthrocon in Pittsburgh with an attendance of 1,128 furries.

In 2010, still the largest, Anthrocon was attended by 4,238. The current largest furry convention,

MidWest FurFest in Chicago, had a registered attendance of over 11,000 in 2019. It outpaced

Anthrocon, which had an attendance of 9,358, for the second time in a row that year (WikiFur

contributors 2019). Not all furries go to conventions, and individual conventions fail to reflect the

global interconnectedness of the furry fandom. Still, it is a useful metric to show just how much

the fandom has grown. I argue that this has, in large part, to do with the suitability of the fursona

for online communication; it has articulated an affective disposition that is designed to cross virtual

boundaries. I will expand upon this in Chapters 2 and 3. However, as I will show in the next section,

this growth was not without its growing pains.

The Furry Sex Wars

Fans have long struggled with popular media representations of their cultures. The first

chapter of fandom scholar Henry Jenkins's influential 1992 book *Textual Poachers* begins with a

description of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch addressing Trekkies, as well as a *Newsweek* article

operating along similar lines, wherein fans are "characterized as 'kooks' obsessed with trivia…as

misfits and 'crazies'; as 'a lot of overweight…divorced and single women'; as childish adults; in

short, as people who have little or no 'life' apart from their fascination with this particular program"

(1992: 11). Jenkins breaks these stereotypes down into a list of seven categories, each represented

in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch: fans as brainless consumers, fans as trivia obsessives, fans as

inappropriately invested in worthless culture, fans as social misfits, fans as feminized or

desexualized, fans as infantile, and fans as unable to distinguish fantasy from reality (10). He

argues that these characteristics are repeated across nearly all popular representations of fan culture, and even historicizes them back to the etymology of the word "fan" (as in "fanatic"). Much of Jenkins's work in this chapter is to challenge these stereotypes, while also addressing academic concerns of fans as passive consumers.

However, the aim of fandom studies appears to have shifted somewhat over the years. As fandom scholar Mel Stanfill writes, "More recent analysis, beginning from a premise of fandom as a 'new normal' for media interaction, has been equally disinclined to give attention to stereotypes around fans, albeit out of a sense that fans are no longer subject to such marginalizing representations from traditional media sources" (2013: 119). Stanfill's claim here is twofold: one, that media and fandom scholars have failed to pay critical attention to representations or stereotypes around fandom since Jenkins; and two, that this is because media representations have essentially stopped using these harmful stereotypes as fans have moved into the center stage of the media landscape. However, Stanfill argues that it is important to look at stereotypes of fandom in order to understand how they continue to affect fans' perceptions of themselves and each other. Stanfill's interviewees, fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, demonstrate an internalization of many of the stereotypes put forward by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. Each entry from the Jenkins stereotype list seems to have a referent in the mind of at least one *Xena* fan. Importantly, however, Stanfill's *Xena* fans do not see themselves as inhabiting these stereotypes; rather, they are always the domain of the *other*, the "bad fan," the fan to be avoided. Furry has also developed its own idea of the "bad fan," or perhaps the "bad furry," coalescing around issues of public sexuality, and culminating in what I refer to as the "furry sex wars."

The period from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s in the feminist movement is infamous for the so-called "sex wars" or "porn wars," wherein a public rift developed between

"sex-positive" feminists and "anti-porn" feminists (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 5). The central questions revolved around whether pornography or other sexual displays were inherently harmful to women's liberation and progress, or if they in fact empowered women to take control over their bodies and sexuality. Feminist author Lisa Duggan writes, "We were ultimately shocked to find ourselves defending our activist communities—of sex workers, of butch-fem dykes, of lesbian sadomasochists—against political attacks, launched by *feminists*" (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 5), an unexpected turn for a movement seen as unified in the struggle for women's equality. Publications, political organizations, and all manner of other institutions in the feminist space faced rupture over the place of sex in the women's liberation movement. Anti-pornography legislation was introduced in several states, spearheaded by anti-porn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. Duggan's side fought back in a variety of rhetorical modes including anti-censorship, the lack of any single monolithic thing called pornography, and the anti-porn argument's problematic construction of gender, among others (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 5–10).

Ultimately, Duggan writes, "[the] porn wars more or less subsided in the mid-eighties as the antiporn position lost favor among most feminists, and lost in the courts and legislatures of the United States as well" (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 5), referring to cases such as *American Booksellers Ass'n, Inc. v. Hudnut* (1985) in which anti-pornography legislation was ruled unconstitutional or otherwise did not become law. However, she argues, some facets of the anti-porn side of the feminist sex wars live on. Duggan points first to legal outcomes like those in Canada, wherein gay and lesbian materials were seized after an apparent sex-positive victory in the courts led to a negligently homophobic legal precedent; and to a University of Michigan conference in which videos portraying the lives of sex workers were physically removed from an

art exhibit in the name of harm reduction (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 9–10). In order to move past these barriers, Duggan puts forward her primary discursive concept: sexual dissent. She writes:

> Rather than invoking fixed, natural identities and asking only for privacy or an end to discrimination, we must expand our right to public *sexual dissent*. This is the path of access to public discourse and political representation. (Duggan and Hunter 2006: 5)

Sex, she argues, holds true political power, and sexual dissent is a powerful tool against the oppression of sexual and gender minorities. Central to this idea of sexual dissent is the strategic maintenance of sexual expression in public space.

Public expression of sexuality has been a part of the furry fandom since its inception. Recall *Vootie*, a fanzine for "the funny animal liberation front," which began in 1976. In the fifth issue of *Vootie*, dated 1977, an article appeared titled "There Ain't Enuff Sex in Funny Animal Comics," sparking co-founder and comics artist Reed Waller to begin his erotic funny animal comic series *Omaha: The Cat Dancer*—and opening up a rift in the *Vootie* readership that may have ultimately led to the end of its run (Waller and Worley 1995: 6). More expressly involving a public display of sexuality, the first furry convention, ConFurence Zero in 1989, famously featured a leather-clad dominatrix deer fursuiter performing a sexualized dance (Hongo 2016). During these early years of the furry fandom, sexuality was a prominent facet of furry creativity and expression. But it was also a controversial one. According to Joe Strike, whispered rumors of semen-covered elevators and streaking attendees followed ConFurence 8 in 1997 (Strike 2017), while ConFurence 9 was covered sensationally as a bestiality sex romp in the pages of British "lad's mag" *Loaded* (Borrows 1998). These were largely considered "bad press," and other conventions took note—exemplified by Anthrocon chairman Samuel Conway (a.k.a. Uncle Kage) who is quoted in Strike (2017) as stating that "[ConFurence] very, very deliberately billed the convention as a sex party. They

advertised it heavily in the fetish community […] By ConFurence 6 it looked like PrideFest."

Apparently, this was something to be avoided.[5]

Rumblings about waning tolerance for open sexuality in the furry community reached a fever pitch in the late 1990s and early 2000s, ratcheting up after furry artist Charla Trotman (a.k.a. Squee Rat) posted her infamous 1998 diatribe, "This Sordid Little Business: One Embarrassed 'Furry Fan' Has a Go at Defining 'Furry'" to the web. Casting aspersions on the more sexually inclined aspects of the furry fandom, Trotman begins her "Furry Manifesto" by writing, "I remember when being a pervert was a bad thing," (1998). The uncomfortable similarity of this phrasing to violent homophobic rhetoric of the late twentieth century constitutes some of the least offensive of Trotman's vitriolic prose, which takes aim at plushophiles, "furry lifestylers," otherkin, spirit animals, and even vegans—all of whom are portrayed as undesirables infecting the furry fandom. After it was posted to the web, heated discussion began to take place throughout the alt.fan.furry and alt.lifestyle.furry Usenet groups (see Galen 1998 for an example). Trotman's words apparently resonated with a large enough subset of the furry fandom that a splinter community, the Burned Furs, was formed in its wake (Wikifur contributors 2018)—leading to several years more of heated Usenet conversation and web diatribes (Simo 2006).

Though the Burned Furs largely died down in the mid-2000s,[6] debates over sexuality in the furry fandom have continued into the present day. Two notable recent incidents of public argumentation over public sexuality at furry conventions occurred in November 2017 and April 2018 regarding "pup hoods," a type of headgear associated with the puppy play subculture of the BDSM and leather kink communities. The first incident occurred when a prominent Twitter user in the furry community tweeted a flippant, profanity-laden plea to end the "gross" practice of furries wearing pup hoods in public. It is uncertain what prompted this tweet, but it resulted in an

eruption of Twitter debate on the subject of pup gear in public furry convention spaces.[7] Seemingly in validation of this user's pleas, the second incident began in April 2018 with a video that appeared to show two pups in hoods having sex out on the floor of the convention Furry Weekend Atlanta. Though it was later revealed that the two were "moshing," a common practice in the puppy play community involving platonic wrestling and petting (O'Furr 2018), the damage was already done, and anti-pup sentiments still appear on furry Twitter.

Sex in public life is a vital, and, I argue, *queer* part of the furry fandom. As noted above, the earliest years of the furry fandom featured sexuality as a prominent aspect and driver of activity. What is queer about that? As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue in their foundational queer theory text, "Sex in Public":

> Respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy. But their success, their way of living, their political rights, and their very identities would never have been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise. Extinguish it, and almost all *out* gay or queer culture will wither on the vine. (Berlant and Warner 1998: 563)

Here, Berlant and Warner argue that any rights gained by queer culture (and indeed, the existence of named LGBTQ identities) are contingent upon the sexual subculture that preceded them—the sexual subculture that still exists but is rendered "sleazy" by respectability politics. This passage is just as relevant to the furry sex wars as it is to the gay liberation movement. Not only would furry fandom not exist without the public sex cultures of *Omaha: The Cat Dancer* and ConFurence Zero, they are essential to its continued function as a queer and accepting subculture. One prominent furry artist recognizes this in a Twitter post following the second pup hood controversy, writing, "i'm old enough to remember when fursuits were considered fetish gear and lots of furries

didn't want [people] wearing them on the floor at conventions. consider that acceptance of [something] originally born of sexuality can lead to identity & culture beyond its birthplace" [sic] (@artdecaderoo 2018). Of course, many outside the furry fandom still view fursuits as fetish gear, but within the fandom that view has become marginal. In that process, they have come to be seen as simply costumes, devoid of any inherent sexuality, by a majority of furries.[8]

Furry as Queer Fandom

My own experience in the furry community is also marked by the fandom's openness towards sexuality. My earliest encounters with furry media involved furry porn art and erotic writing as posted to furry websites like VCL, Yiffstar, FurNation, fchan, and FurAffinity. In these spaces, adult-oriented and/or pornographic artwork coexisted peacefully alongside "clean" artwork. This content was often clearly marked as adult or mature, but it was always presented in a friendly and inviting way. As I was entering puberty, I was discovering my own sexuality, and as an introverted nerd, I was doing so on the Internet. Thus, I encountered these furry art websites at the same time as I encountered "real" pornography: the mainstream, adult industry products, which felt scary and excessive in their brazen fleshiness, loud moans, and close-up camera angles. (Porn of this era, the early 2000s, also seemed especially extreme and degrading, but perhaps it was merely my young eyes coloring this perception.) Furry animals were just easier to relate to. I had been learning to be a person through animals in media throughout my childhood, and this sexual extension felt natural, even safe.

Chris Seabrook connects this to Judith Butler's concept of "parodic displacement," writing that through the presence of animal characters and exaggerated or stylized depictions of sex, "some Furry pornography can position itself in a 'theme-park' world where sexual practices that may

appear violent and distasteful are merely funny and satirical" (2010: 215). Seabrook sees some furry porn as extreme in subject matter, but cartoonish in execution, thus filling a similar role to drag performance in Butler's work. (I question Seabrook's use of the word "merely" as this porn is clearly also intended to arouse sexually.) I see this displacement process especially clearly in certain fetish niches such as vorarephilia (eating and being eaten), inflation (bodies filling up, often with air, to achieve a round shape), and candy gore (extreme bodily disfigurement with blood and guts replaced by candy and slime). But there is just as much furry porn that is not campy, cartoonish, or over the top. Perhaps the majority of furry porn is comparatively vanilla in subject matter and subdued in execution. But what marks this furry porn as non-normative is its depiction of fluffy, cuddly friends casually enjoying sex and intimacy. Instead of parodic displacement, it boldly affirms the sexual power of cuteness and comfort.

Doubly so for representations of queer subjectivities and sexualities: sex that was lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex, polyamorous, public, or private; it all felt fuzzy, friendly, and even normal. And perhaps equally importantly, it was all there. I did not have to contend with the adult media industry's ideas of what kinds of sex and bodies people wanted to see. That is not to say that the furry porn I saw did not have its own biases, trends, and norms. But by and large, they tended toward the queer, and that helped me come to terms with my own sexuality in a non-judgmental environment. The later friendships and sexual relationships I entered as a result of these early fascinations did even more for my own self-acceptance, as furry fandom allowed me to meet many self-identified queer folks. The place and time in which I came of age did not easily allow for non-normative sexual and gender expressions, and furries online were some of the first queer people I ever came into contact with. They were also some of the first people I ever came out to; in fact, in many furry spaces I did not even have to "come out," as sexual expression was

as commonplace as any other kind. The Internet allowed me to connect with others who shared my niche interest, which was helpful on its own, but the fact that they were also queer helped me feel more socially comfortable as a queer person. And it is not just my experience: furry is truly a queer fandom, in the sense that it has a disproportionately large population of LGBTQ-identifying people (Plante et al. 2016: 83–87). Thus, furry is a queer fandom that queers fandom.

Though there has been a small pocket of furry research emerging from academia in the past ten years, I believe furry still has a lot to teach us about processes of media- and meaning-making, community, identity, and sexuality, especially as rendered through networked communication technologies. This project is an attempt to make one slice through this subject, an in-depth look at the fursona; at once both a deeply personal project and an attempt to contribute to scholarly knowledge in the field of media studies. My hope is that this cross-section will be a jumping-off point for further study. I also attempt to produce a work that is meaningful and reflective of my experience; hopefully, the experience of my informants; and if I am lucky, the experience of many other furries, nerds, queers, and cultural outsiders alike.

Notes

[1] I will refrain from revealing my handle here to protect the privacy of a close friend and interlocutor who requested that I do so.

[2] I have respected the way my informants have chosen to be represented: by real name, handle, or a fictional name of my creation.

[3] I found reference to one additional master's thesis in women's and gender studies that I was ultimately unable to track down (Henry 2013).

[4] As may be self-evident, multilimb porn is pornography of characters with extra (sets of) limbs. BoyTaurs and Metabods were/are websites devoted to artwork and stories in this genre, respectively.

[5] Kage's attempt to clean up the public image of furry is chronicled in a number of sources, perhaps most notably the *Fursonas* documentary (Rodriguez 2016), which, according to Jen Yamato of the *Daily Beast* blog, portrays him as "the David Miscavige of furries," (Yamato 2016) meant as an unflattering comparison to the Scientology leader. In reality, he is more of an Andrea Dworkin of furries.

[6] Apparently putting those views behind her, Charla Trotman has gone on to edit and publish several anthologies of "ladycentric porn" comics entitled *Smut Peddler* through her graphic novel publishing house, Iron Circus Comics (Gilly 2016: 151–153), which has also published works directly involving furry erotica (Sachiko 2019).

[7] It is perhaps important to note here that furry and puppy play are two distinct subcultures with some overlap; by my observation, there are far more furries who are also "pups" than the other way around.

[8] I do not mean to insinuate that fursuits are without their sexual uses, as that is in fact quite important to many fursuiters, but this practice (known as "murrsuiting") has now attracted the controversy formerly aimed at fursuits as a whole. By my observation, most fursuiters do not partake.

Chapter 2. Queer Becoming and the Fursona

In the previous chapter, I showed that furry queers fandom by dislocating fans from textual objects and by constituting a queer sex public. I touched on my first encounters with furry porn and the safe haven of sexuality it provided me as a young queer person. In this chapter, I lay out some of my ethnographic work regarding the process of becoming a furry. Here I take up queer scholars EL McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen's directive in their book Queer Times, Queer Becomings that we "think existence not in terms of being, of what exists, but of becoming, or the being of becoming" (2011: 2), and ultimately "examine what various modes of becoming queer— or of queer becoming—tell us about the biopolitical forces at work in queer cultural life" (8). I argue that furry fandom has exposed some of these forces through its own processes of queer becoming: first, *moe* affection for fictional characters; second, the playful sociality of roleplay; and third, the collaborative artmaking, engagement with symbols, and reckoning with fandom norms involved in developing and adopting a fursona. I read these processes as queering and making visible the social construction of identity writ large.

First Encounters and *Moe* Affections

Starting around age 8 or 9, I began to sneak *Calvin and Hobbes* anthologies into my bedroom at night and read them under the covers with a mini flashlight. It was not just because Bill Watterson's work was funny, realistic, and poignant, though I enjoyed all of those things about it. I also felt a deep affection toward Hobbes—the stuffed tiger who becomes a living, breathing anthropomorphic tiger in the world of young Calvin's imagination. In this form, Hobbes is roughly two and a half times Calvin's height; a fuzzy, friendly, carefree, at times playfully antagonistic partner in crime. Hobbes is a big, loveable cuddle buddy who will eagerly wax philosophical or

join Calvin in imaginative childhood play, distracting him from annoying homework or whiling away the long summer days and winter nights. I felt such warm feelings toward Hobbes, falling in love with both his demeanor and his appearance, and I badly longed for a Hobbes of my own. Looking back, I think these were the first feelings in my life that I could describe as romantic attraction. Yes, Hobbes was a fictional character, and an anthropomorphic animal; he was not even technically real in the world of *Calvin and Hobbes*. He was just a manifestation of Calvin's need for companionship as an only child, a projection onto an inanimate stuffed animal. Perhaps I also projected onto Hobbes a need for a romantic longing, a love beyond family or friend, at the beginning of my adolescence. I nonetheless felt a yearning connection with this idealized character, this fiction within a fiction.

There is some cultural precedent for this phenomenon of romantic or quasi-romantic feelings toward fictional characters: the phenomenon of *moe* (pronounced "mo-ay"), imported from Japanese *otaku* (anime fan) subculture. Popular culture scholar Patrick Galbraith defines *moe* as "an affectionate response to fictional characters… most often from manga, anime, and games… [*moe* means] to fall in love with fictional characters," (2014: 5-9). Love and affection alone fail to capture the specific longing of *moe*, but Galbraith correctly points to a felt response to seeing certain imagery or coming to know certain fictional characters. Anthropologist Ian Condry foregrounds the unfulfillable nature of that affection, writing that *moe* is "an internalized emotional response to something, generally with no hope for a reciprocal emotional payback," pointing also to its relationship to consumer culture as "the assertion of the value of an internalized consumption" (2013: 187). Condry sees this value as potentially political in its deeply internal orientation towards objects of consumption. In his book *Otaku*, Japanese literary critic Hiroki Azuma writes about *moe* in terms of character traits from media that may be separated and organized in a database. Azuma's

translators, Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono, explain the homonymous etymology of *moe* as "burning" and "sprouting" desires,[1] which could indicate anything from passionate love to a feeling of gentleness toward a cute object (Azuma 2009: 128-129). This etymology is evocative of an adorable little sprout that one might feel the overwhelming desire to pluck, but never can; or perhaps a sprouting of feeling that, left unfulfilled, produces a forest fire.

Most often, the *moe* feeling is associated with adult male subjectivity and *otaku* subculture, directed toward cute girl characters. Critics have argued that *moe* is just another form of men sexualizing women, specifically and inappropriately fictional young girls (Condry 2013: 191), which takes a pathological and dysfunctional shape as they are unable to find relationships with real women (Galbraith 2019: 59-61, 92). However, Condry and Galbraith argue that the *moe* phenomenon more accurately represents an attempt to rethink gender roles, as defined by men's relationship to productivity/consumption (Condry 2013: 187) and women (Galbraith 2014: 8) respectively. Condry writes that "if the salaryman stood for one model of Japan's economic productivity, [then] *otaku* represent a new form of manhood through consumption that offers an alternative vision of value," (2013: 195) arguing that *moe* presents *otaku* men with a source self-worth through a deeply internal orientation towards consumption (of media with fictional characters). In other words, *moe* provides a way for men to define themselves through media consumption rather than financial productivity, by which measure they may be deemed a failure. And citing *moe* fan and cultural critic Tōru Honda, Galbraith writes that in Honda's view, "the norms [of men and women's relationships] have become toxic. Many men are made to feel like failures, which can lead to social isolation, psychological stress, and violence toward oneself and others," (2019: 93) while *moe* provides an alternative route into love. Honda sees the potential in *moe* for a "love revolution" for men. *Moe* is fundamentally about men embracing and surrounding

themselves with cuteness, an escape from traditional gender roles, achieved through love and attraction to fictional characters.

In fandom lore, a sort of *moe* is the origin story of the every-furry, as depicted in a popular comic by artist Blueballs, which has become widespread as a meme among furries (Blueballs 2013). In this comic, three friends are discussing their first crushes: the first two friends first fell in love with Bruce Willis and Britney Spears. The third friend, the stand-in for the every-furry, is embarrassed to reveal his first crush, as it was the werewolf-like creature WereGarurumon from the anime series *Digimon*. This is the kind of *moe* that many furries encounter. It differs from *otaku moe* in that furry is not only about men, and it is especially not only about straight men: according to surveys conducted by the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, roughly between two-thirds and three-quarters of furries identify as cis-male, and only one-fifth identify as heterosexual (FurScience 2019). *Moe* is arguably already queer in that it provides an alternative to traditional gender roles, but furry fandom further queers *moe* by destabilizing "cute girls" as the central object of *moe* affection—and opening the subjectivity of *moe* up to women, non-binary people, gay men, and more. Unlike traditional *moe* girls, WereGarurumon is not exactly cute by most definitions—and likewise, furries in the gay *bara* and muscle sub-fandoms within furry seek hyper-masculine sexuality in their furry fantasy.

These feelings of *moe* affection are what drove me, and several of my respondents, into furry fandom in the first place. As Jesse explains: "In the late '90s, I saw a werewolf movie on TV. And when some people see a werewolf movie, they think, 'That's a powerful metaphor for growing up.' And when other people see it, they think, 'Wow, I want to fuck that werewolf.'" This led him directly to looking up werewolf pictures and stumbling across a furry website. Jesse demonstrates that, like *otaku moe*, the feelings of furry *moe* can be intensely sexual in nature, though this is not

universal. Several of my other interlocutors also first encountered male objects of furry *moe* affection. KK recalls her first "*crush* crush" as Brooklyn, a gargoyle come to life from the animated television series *Gargoyles*; David still holds "a special place in my heart" for Geronimo Stilton, the anthropomorphic mouse protagonist of the Italian children's book series of the same name. In furry culture more broadly, the vulpine title character of Disney's 1973 *Robin Hood* adaptation is widely cited as an early crush (Patten [1997] 2012); the fox has even earned himself an article on the SYFY television network's Fangrrls blog about this very phenomenon among the general public (Donaldson 2018).

Several of my interlocutors had even more explicitly sexual first encounters with furry attraction. For example, Momiji writes:

> "I had just started middle school and a new game (Sonic Adventure 2 Battle) had just come out, and my friends and I spent a lot of time drooling over Rouge the Bat, and particularly her alternative costume which showed a lot of cleavage. It was thus that I had my first experience expressing sexual feelings in a social context, and came to view sexual discussion about fictional, non-human characters as a safe alternative to discussion of actual women. I was very uncomfortable discussing sexual attraction to real women because I didn't seem to have the same gauge for it as others, which in retrospect was one of the first signs that I wasn't straight."

I find two things revelatory about Momiji's account: one, that *moe* attraction to fictional characters is viewed as acceptable within a heteronormative homosocial middle school environment; and two, that he views the anthropomorphic animal as a safe haven for queer sexual development (recall also my discussion in Chapter 1 of the "safe" aspect of furry porn). Momiji's discomfort with discussing "real" women sexually may be a similar sort of discomfort to that which Galbraith's

otaku feel about traditional gender roles. Momiji's use of the phrase "real women" also parallels Galbraith's *otaku* terminology of "two-" and "three-dimensional" women (2019: 93-94), where the former refers to "the virtual" and the latter refers to "the real." Consider Boellstorff's questioning of this dichotomy ([2008] 2015: 21; he prefers "actual" to refer to the physical/non-virtual world) alongside Condry's provocation that "the *moe* feeling should be seen […], perhaps, as a question of whether there really is a distinction between virtual and real," (2013: 191). The feelings for these virtual characters are as *real* as feelings for living humans, embodied as affective responses. When Momiji and his ostensibly non-furry, heterosexual, male friends were "drooling over" Rouge the Bat's cleavage, they were expressing a *moe* affection in the same mode as they would express affection for a human woman. It was only Momiji who identified therein an alternative to heteronormativity. *Moe* provides the key to unlock this potential of the virtual.

Several of my contacts also identify first encounters that did not involve sexual or romantic crushes on cartoons. Several of them mention childhood play as influencing their later furrydom. For example, Puppypaws30 writes, "i roleplayed dogs a lot in real life with friends because we watched balto too much. we also roleplayed the lion king a lot and black beauty." Puppypaws30's early experiences do involve media interactions, but these are clearly more about playing with or "poaching" media than *moe* attraction. One of my interlocutors, Rhumba, identified no media influence at all in his furry fandom, as he explains:

> "I think I am an outlier, because I mostly didn't have cable as a kid so I usually watched Fox Kids power rangers and stuff on bad reception over the air TV. I did spend a lot more time outside though, and I always liked animals. I grew up with a dog and cats. I didn't really get into cartoons and furries until adolescence really. […] I was more interested in animals first."

Though he does allude to adolescent encounters with anthropomorphic media, Rhumba points directly to an earlier love of animals as the initial spark that led to his furry fandom. He regards himself as an "outsider" in this aspect, perhaps revealing the pervasiveness of the fandom mythology about becoming a furry, imagined as always starting with cartoon animal crushes.

Rhumba's story forces me to consider that by beginning this chapter with a discussion of *moe*, I may be merely repeating and perpetuating this fandom lore of the typical or normal pathway to furry. However, as that pathway does reflect my own process of becoming furry and that of several of my interlocutors, I must remain faithful to my own experience (while also refraining from totalizing or universal claims). After all, furry is almost always explained as a fandom *about* anthropomorphic animals; cartoons, not the biological reality of animal life. Rhumba's history can also present us with the possibility that these two are one in the same, as far as humans are aware. Perhaps feelings of affection for animals are, in some sense, *moe* in that we can only understand animals through the limits of the human mind—in other words, with some degree of anthropomorphism. Regardless, there clearly exists in both furry *moe* and Rhumba's history—in other words, all of my respondents' "origin stories"—an affection for non-humans that eventually leads to the process of becoming furry. The misplaced or pathological is precisely the domain of the queer, and likewise this affection is precisely what sets the stage for queer identity construction.

Entering the Furry Mediascape

Much of furry fandom exists solely online, and this is why the bulk of my research is conducted online. Previous studies, including much of the work done by the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, have been conducted at furry conventions. The IARP have themselves acknowledged some of the data discrepancies this introduces (FurScience 2019). And

although there were a handful of exceptions, the majority of my interlocutors reported finding out about furry fandom through the Internet. In the previous section, I discussed the first stage of furry fandom, namely, pre-furry encounters that shaped furries in their youth. The second stage, as I see it, is the first encounter online with what I call the "furry mediascape," or the loose constellation of web media and virtual worlds produced by and for furries online. This stage provides a glimpse into a variety of the different ways the furry fandom expresses its social structure and norms, as well as an examination of the ways furries navigate through Internet technology to find themselves wading deep into the thick of the mediascape.

My own archive has proven spotty when it comes to tracing back the early history of my online furry fandom. I have had to rely primarily on memory and small digital traces, such as the creation date of my first FurAffinity account, which was February 2007. I can recall browsing some furry websites well before that time, including fchan (a 4chan-style imageboard for furries founded in 2005) and VCL (the Velan Central Library, a furry multimedia archive website founded in 1995). That is why I place the starting date at 2006, but it likely extends further back than that. For example, I had been a member of Sonic CulT, a now-defunct message board for fans of the *Sonic the Hedgehog* video game series, since late 2003, at which point I would have been 9 years old. I recall seeing furry fandom artwork there and encountering a link to an obscure furry art repository called Tails Kicks Ass (which, somehow, still exists). I also vaguely remember browsing fantasy website Elfwood around this time and seeing artwork of werewolves that was definitely furry-adjacent. I am somewhat envious of those of my informants who have clear memories of when they first encountered furry fandom, as I find those moments illuminating. Perhaps it is the fragmented nature of my own furry history that has led me to want to create some sort of record to tie together loose pieces.

Many furries enter the furry mediascape through roleplaying in virtual worlds, at times playing as furry characters before they know what furry or fursonas are. For example, Roger discusses encountering a bunny roleplayer in a Dungeons & Dragons chatroom: "it was a cute character in a big field of characters who were more like.. cool. I grew up in the 80s when all the male role models were sorta like GI Joe or He-Man or something." This is Roger's first encounter with a fursona, a revelatory glimpse of a way out of macho masculinity. This recalls *moe* questioning of gender norms, but with a queer twist. Like *otaku moe*, it is about the gender politics enacted by men's encounter and appreciation for cuteness; unlike *moe*, it is about the desire to *be* something cute (or at least see a cute male as a role model) rather than to fall in love with something cute. In her seminal paper about multi-user dungeons (MUDs), sociologist Sherry Turkle writes that such roleplay "throws issues of the impact of gender on human relations into relief" (1994: 165) as it allows players to embody other genders. Roger's story makes clear the ways in which gender expressions leave profound impacts on young minds. Rather than gender-swapping as in Turkle's article, here Roger is encountering an alternative masculinity at a young age. As such, this encounter is about gender *development* as much as it is about gender embodiment.

Another furry who encountered the fandom through roleplay, Puppypaws30, demonstrates the persistence and intermedia flow of roleplaying in the AOL era. Puppypaws30 writes:

> "what first brought me into the fandom was i was roleplaying a 'werewolf in permanent wolfwoman form', all black fur of course, named zeba. i went into an AOL chat room called The Tavern to roleplay. i ended up being recognized by someone as 'a furry' though i didn't know what it was, so they told me. […] i was about 9. […] i started going on furcadia [MMORPG] a lot from that point and drawing. i was roleplaying and just out of character talking with people in different furcadia dreams."

This resonates with Turkle's observations about MUDs: "there are always people logged on to the game; there is always someone to talk to or something to do" (1994: 162). Indeed, being in the virtual worlds of The Tavern and Furcadia ultimately became less about roleplay for Puppypaws30 and more about everyday mundane social interaction. This interaction is casual, seen at first as just another mode of childhood play. Puppypaws30's story makes clear that simply existing in persistent furry (queer) virtual worlds is another pathway towards "becoming" outside of *moe*.

Unlike in my own experience, Puppypaws30 was identified as a furry by another roleplayer before they came to identify with that label. This was echoed by another of my interlocutors, Mat, who was asked if she was a furry after giving a class presentation on her art. Both Puppypaws30 and Mat eagerly adopted the label, unaware or uncaring of any stigma or positionality on the "geek hierarchy." Additionally, Puppypaws30's experience resonates with sociologist T.L. Taylor's explanation that the "'understanding' and social context of any given body may turn out to be quite different than that intended by the user", and that "users may also not anticipate how a particular avatar will be 'read' by the community," (2002: 56). That is not to say Puppypaws30's Zeba character was read in a necessarily oppositional way, but rather it was read as connected to a subculture that it was not. As Taylor explains, avatars can signal group affiliation (2002: 46), which also brings to mind Hebdige's assertion that, along with signaling a "difference" from hegemonic culture, subcultural styles exist to communicate a group identity (1979: 102). As a result, as Puppypaws30's example demonstrates, avatar style can also be a pathway *into* a group through a misidentified affiliation. Again, by merely socializing within "queerly worlded" virtual spaces, a process of queer becoming may be set in motion.

As I mentioned previously, the werewolf fan Jesse found the fandom through an Internet search after seeing a film. He recalls: "So, I saw this werewolf movie, and I thought—that's an

interesting concept, I'm going to look up werewolves next time I'm online. When I did, […] there was one with a werewolf sitting in a bathtub. That was me realizing that there's a subculture there." In some ways, Roger, Puppypaws30, Jesse, and I all represent an outdated way of entering the fandom, reflecting a limitation of my peer group as all of my interlocutors are in their mid-20s or older. New furries are now encountering the fandom through much less directed and specific avenues, instead coming into contact tangentially with fursona accounts on social media. One of my interlocutors, Rex, informs me about a regular occurrence when posting his artwork on Tumblr: "My [furry] art would often get reblogged by gay porn accounts," he explains, "so it would just be gay furry porn alongside a bunch of photos of daddies." The followers of those gay porn accounts may see Rex's artwork and suddenly become aware of furry fandom through a completely unrelated set of interests. Still, these encounters echo Puppypaws30 and Mat, who were brought in as outsiders by insiders recognizing something in their behavior. This playful and casual nature of furry's virtual worlding project is reflected in the next chapter, as fursonas have become avatars through which everyday mundane social interaction takes place on social media platforms.

Through these chance encounters with "queer being," the process of "queer becoming" is set in motion. These are avenues only made possible by the technological infrastructure of the Internet; indeed, they reveal this infrastructure's queer affective potential. Like Azuma's database, the furry mediascape is a traversable repository of affect; like Turkle's MUDs, it is constantly in motion. Entering the mediascape does not always involve the reading of textual objects, at times springing from relational activity in a roleplaying game or virtual world. As the fursona has become increasingly central to first encounters and furry life in general, I will analyze another important step in the "queer becoming" of becoming furry: the process of developing a fursona.

Developing A Fursona

When I first created an account on the FurAffinity (FA) art gallery website in 2006, and thus was forced to create my first specifically furry identity, I began by adopting an old username and no avatar. This configuration indicates the profile of a "lurker," a user who does not interact but merely observes. On FA, you needed an account to view adult artwork and save favorites to your profile, and those were the only reasons I wanted an account to begin with. Still, I hated seeing the empty default avatar symbol, so I chose a photo of a black cat peeking out of a box (in my mind, a more creative way to indicate that I was a lurker). I believe this was my entire profile for several years, though I have no record. Around 2010 I created an account on the microblogging service Tumblr to share furry art I had found on FA and elsewhere, linking back to the original artists, trying to find likeminded furries. By 2012 I began making my first furry friends through Tumblr, two furries who encouraged me to draw for myself. I drew some sketches in a sketchbook and shared them on Tumblr, which encouraged me further, so I decided to try my hand at digital art with my laptop's trackpad. As I wanted to post these to FurAffinity, I decided I needed a new avatar as well, so I drew a white cat with blue-tipped ears. I am not sure where that idea came from, but at the time it seems I wanted a cat fursona. However, unsatisfied with the blue cat's color scheme, I settled on a pencil drawing of a generic dog.

After posting a few drawings to Tumblr and FurAffinity, I began interacting more with other furry artists. In particular, I started to attend livestreams of furries making art, including my interlocutor Jesse. In the chat of this livestream I began to make many more friends, including an artist named C, who was relatively local. On one of my visits to C we started discussing what my fursona might look like—she suggested a rat, based on my face, but I did not really identify with the animal. I told her I was thinking of either a dog or a cat. She thought that a dog suited me better,

and after thinking about it and deciding that I would like to aspire to be dog-like, I began researching different dog breeds and their temperaments on Wikipedia. I found the following description of the Australian Cattle Dog resonant: "When on home ground, the Australian Cattle Dog is an affectionate and playful pet. However, it is reserved with people it does not know and naturally cautious in new situations" (Wikipedia contributors 2013). In addition, the Cattle Dog was described therein as "energetic and intelligent with an independent streak," qualities which I aspired to if I did not always embody. I sent a photo from the Wikipedia article to C as reference and she drew the first version of my dog fursona, fairly faithful to the photo with a painterly style.

My fursona continued to develop through drawings by others; my identity was produced in a collaboration at a distance, communicated through text conversations and artmaking by a number of artists, each building on the last. The second version was produced out of necessity as I was planning to attend my first convention, so my friend Mat made me a badge with which to identify myself—the common mode of identification among furries at gatherings. My interlocutor and friend, Jesse, drew the third version as a surprise birthday gift. His application of a cute and cartoony style influenced further renderings by Mat, who brought out extra tufts of fur and emphasized round and soft edges, adding freckle-like white markings to my fursona's cheeks. A commission from my friend Avvy birthed a *chibi* or miniature version of my character, as she added bigger tufts of fur and a rounder head shape. An artist with a less cartoony style, Leo, gifted me art using Avvy's drawing as a reference, realizing her *chibi* sketches into solid forms with depth and shading, somehow bigger and rounder than ever. These artists have progressively built from each other's work, co-creating a character infused at each stage with their artistic styles— I never asked for any of the additional details—and their perceptions of my personality. This process makes visible the ways in which identity is always produced relationally, but it also atomizes these

relations into discrete steps. Like the pre-furry encounters of *moe* and role-play, the later fursona development process makes the social construction of identity clear by providing fluid, playful, queer pathways.

Species and Symbols

Though some of my interlocutors knew immediately what their fursona would be—Jesse the werewolf fan was always going to be a wolf—many others expressed difficulty in deciding what species would suit them best. Just as in my own experience, several of them found it difficult to determine whether their fursona should be a reflection of their existing personality traits, or an aspirational set of ideals that they may hope to live up to by inhabiting their fursona on a daily basis. As Puppypaws30 writes, "the [contradiction] between 'what i feel like' and 'what i want to be' makes fursona decisions that much harder." Puppypaws30 still has not decided on a persistent fursona, despite being in the fandom since the days of Furcadia. Roger, on the other hand, picked his fursona based on conclusions that seem to indicate a lack of self-esteem: "Moles are kind of potato shaped, not very cute, most people aren't that [interested] in them, and that sorta reflects my feelings about myself. I think I'm not very cute, and I don't think people are interested in me at all. […] If I were to design a character to represent who I think I would LIKE to be, rather than who I think I actually am, then I'd pick a cat," he writes. "I think cheetahs are sleek, cool, cute, really interesting." Perhaps due to the pervasiveness of fandom lore, or simply due to a self-motivated desire to be faithful to his own personality, Roger feels that he is unable to choose a more aspirational fursona, instead restricted to a perhaps pessimistic reading of his self-image.

Informant Rhumba builds on that by questioning where those traits are actually rooted: "[My] rat and fox [fursonas] were heavily influenced by societal mythology around those animals

I guess. I remember thinking rat characters are cool but never seeing myself as fitting into the archetype […] They had a sleezy appeal I was into at the time." Rhumba here acknowledges that furry is fundamentally about anthropomorphization, not about real animals. Choosing a fursona is often about picking from a set of symbols that society has associated with animals, rather than inherent physical or biological traits. Even in the cases that furries pick and choose animal biology and psychology for their character, they are always a composite drawn from and into the world of symbols. As philosopher Geoffrey Dierckxsens writes, "our basic encounter with other animals is mediated not only by affection,[2] but also by text: the animals we encounter in life—whether pets, wild beasts, or imaginary monsters—are part of our life stories" (2017: 181). Here Dierckxsens points to both imaginary monsters and pets as part of "life stories," referring to both the narrative we construct to explain ourselves and our experiences, as well as the narratives we write and read as fiction. He argues for a hermeneutic approach to both of these kinds of life stories—in other words, reading and interpreting the texts that we produce about animals and our relationships with them—as a way to arrive at a different kind of knowledge from purely phenomenological study.

Science and technology studies (STS) scholar Eileen Crist uses a similar angle to argue against accounts from sociobiology that seek to invalidate anthropomorphism as valuable to understanding animals: "The label of anthropomorphism," Crist writes, "is used to undermine the credibility, or realist force, of accounts that in some way picture animal life and human affairs as permeable to one another," (1999: 7). Animals, she argues, have "lifeworlds" that cannot be understood through a purely technologizing gaze, or through "economic and social-category concepts from ordinary language," that they have transformed into an "encompassing view" of animal life. Especially fascinating is Crist's unpacking of the use of economic terms like "monopoly, advertising, budgets, efficiency, investment, value, costs, benefits, maximizing,

minimizing, winning, losing" in sociobiological depictions of animals (1999: 132) language that "has a secure technical status backed by the authoritative weight of science" (135). Aligned with the goals of much STS scholarship, Crist seeks to de-naturalize the idea that the language of sociobiology is neutral and objective. She argues that language about animals can never be neutral, objective, or complete, and that human experiences of their lifeworlds have things of value to teach us about them.

The fursona is, as all texts about animals, a semiotic assemblage, drawing from millennia of human imagination and storytelling. In anthrozoologist Margo DeMello's textbook *Animals and Society*, she spends three chapters taking on Dierckxsens's task of making these hermeneutical interpretations of many texts, from ancient fables, to indigenous religion, to contemporary art and cinema (DeMello 2012: 283-345). For many animals, she argues, "the real relationships that humans once had with animals have been largely supplanted by symbolic representations," bolstering Dierckxsens's argument that these sorts of interpretations are increasingly critical in understanding humanity's relationship to animals. As such, it is useful to study the semiotic content of fursonas in order to understand why people choose certain animals. Of course, an attempt to understand why all of my interlocutors chose each of their fursonas would be an endless task. Instead, there is one major animal symbol that I want to discuss here: the werewolf, as it has come up multiple times in my fieldwork (at least three of my interlocutors), and it is perhaps the clearest ancestor to furry's animal-human hybridization.

In discussing the boundary between humans and animals as perceived by different cultures, DeMello gives an example of one creation myth that blurs this boundary: "the nomadic Turkic people of Central Asia believe that they descended from wolves; a she-wolf named Asena was said to have nursed a baby human, leading her to give birth to a race of half-wolf/half-human babies"

(2012: 34). The wolf here is not only seen as a close companion to humankind, but indeed an ancestor to an entire ethnic group of hybrid humans. Similarly, wolves as closely linked to humankind appears in philosopher Herbert De Vriese's account of folklore in late medieval and early modern Europe: "the wolf was perceived as standing much closer to man than a current-day scientific account of wildlife would make plausible […] up to the extreme point where the wolf emerged as not the wild animal belonging to wilderness, but as the human being who is banned from the political order" (2017: 158). De Vriese comes to this conclusion by examining the development of the wolf in folklore up to and including the werewolf, which most clearly represents "the negative definition of what the community is willing to accept as normal human behavior" (2017: 157). As the werewolf represents both the outsider as in De Vriese, and the blurring of human/animal boundaries as in DeMello, it is perhaps no wonder that animal-friendly LGBTQ-identified youth—and both of my werewolf-connected interlocutors identify as such—are drawn to the werewolf as a symbol of their own experience.

These queer engagements with animal and werewolf symbology point towards another reason, in addition to *moe*, that furry is about animal-human hybrids. It is because to be human is also to be animal, but to inhabit the body of a non-human animal calls into question our human social order. This process recalls most clearly Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal," a metamorphosis which they view as characteristic of alternative social arrangements outside of the state and the family ([1980] 1987: 242), a concept that plays a central part in Carlson's (2011) article about fursona performance. In situating this concept in contemporary culture, Carlson, like Condry, links it to consumption and production, writing that becoming-animal works in furry "for some as an expression of an inner essence and for others as escape from a restrictive human persona, […] and all of this performance fuels the buying and selling of commodities" (2011: 207).

I argue that rather than engaging processes of consumption and production, the contemporary social world of the Internet allows for a queer social restructuring along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's original formulation. Social outsiders alienated by the state and the family—in other words, queers—engage in werewolf-like processes of queer becoming to imagine life outside of those structures. Ultimately, as we will see in the next chapter, furries create their own social structures to replace them through a process of queer worlding. Becoming-animal in the fursona is not an *escape* from human sociality or the human persona; it is a queer alternative that both provides new kinds of human interaction and turns non-furry life into an afterthought, even a distant memory.

Absence of A Fursona

Unlike players of graphical virtual worlds and video games, in which program code permits and excludes certain modes of expression and identification, furries' fursona identities are primarily bound by social convention over technical restriction. Though always communicating through technical infrastructures, those infrastructures are constantly changing depending on platforms and modes of interaction, often only limited to the capabilities of the computer display. There is no requirement that one create a furry character to represent oneself; rather, only a username is needed (in most online spaces—though on furry image boards like fchan, the affordance of anonymity eschews even this most basic requirement of identity). The only technical infrastructure that always matters for furry online communication is that of the Internet itself. And while it is quite common for furries to have more than one fursona that they use in different situations, it is much less common for a furry who is active in the fandom to have no fursona at all. Creating a fursona has become something of a furry rite of passage; I felt like an outlier when

I first began interacting in the fandom without one, and in the intervening years, fursonas have become considerably more central to existence in the furry fandom. Each of my original pool of interlocutors had at least one character to represent themselves with, though some (like Puppypaws30) changed this often and did not consider any single one to be their main fursona. But what about furries without a fursona? I was a furry without a fursona for a bit; certainly, there must be some people who are in that position currently. Seeking to gain more insight about this uncommon experience, I made a public posting on Twitter seeking self-identified furries who did not have fursonas. I met two additional correspondents this way: David and Peter. I spoke to both of them through direct messages on Twitter, conducting brief interviews about their experiences as furries without fursonas.

My first correspondent, David, immediately makes it clear that he feels pressure to develop a fursona. He begins our conversation apologetically with an explanation as to why he does not have one, writing, "I'm really new to the community, that's why I don't have a fursona. I don't know if you'd prefer to talk to someone with a little bit more experience." David's comment reifies the social norm that all furries must adopt a fursona as a rite of passage, implying that it would be abnormal if one were active in the community for a long time without one. His entry into furry interests, and even the furry mediascape, seems to stretch further and further back as our conversation continues: 2019, then 2016, then seeing fursuits on Tumblr and reading transformation stories on DeviantArt even earlier. Still, David states that he did not begin to self-identify as a furry until 2019, and that is when he both became active as a participant in the fandom and began to feel the pressure to develop a fursona. He continues: "I've asked some of my favorite artists for advice, and although they've all told me I don't need one, I feel like I do." Despite never

being explicitly told that a fursona is a requirement—in fact, hearing the exact opposite from several active contributors to furry culture—David still feels pressure to adopt one.

This is not unfamiliar, as I felt the same pressure during the 2012 and 2013 period of my activity. When I became active and began to communicate with other furries, I too felt left out of certain activities. Everyone else's icon, it would seem, features their fursona; everyone else, it would seem, refers to each other as animals rather than humans. Moreover, if you commission or trade with an artist, what do they draw, if not your fursona? The fursona becomes more desirable at each missed opportunity. Of course, one can find a way around each of these circumstances, and "fit in" perfectly fine without them, as David makes clear: "It's been difficult but not as hard as I thought [it would] be. Everyone is very welcoming." Furries are nothing if not exceptionally flexible and accepting of a range of social behavior. Thus, rather than arising from any concerted gatekeeping on the part of individuals, the felt need for a fursona arises from the broader spectrum of relational activity and implicit social pressures embedded therein.

Responses from both David and Peter indicate that lack of a fursona also coincides with trepidation toward socializing with other furries. David recalls being "too scared to join" furry forums and "scared of what other people would think if I told them that I was a furry" prior to 2019—a reflection of anti-furry sentiment common in nerd cultures and many online spaces, including YouTube videos he watched making fun of furries.[3] David felt afraid of outsiders' perceptions, a fear he had to overcome before self-identifying as a furry and thereby entering the social relationships that encourage fursona adoption. Peter, however, reveals that he has considered himself a furry for six years—a far longer time between self-identification and fursona adoption than David. Peter explains:

Sometimes I think... Maybe if I had this fursona, this identity to show people, it would release a chemical into their brains that would make them wanna approach more. People who create these animal icons of themselves seek out other individuals who have created their own. […] If I went into a bar with a furry event night.. I would perceive these people as people who have established an animal identity. For me I'm not really ready to take that stuff hohoho... It's hard for me to. [… Because] the fursona is everything.

Peter points to neurochemistry as a way of describing the implicit social biases towards appearances and behaviors that signify ingroup belonging (such as in Taylor 2002). He feels that the lack of a fursona is perhaps holding him back socially, while he also recognizes that the inverse is true. In other words, by reflecting that he is "not really ready" to, for example, go to a furry night at a bar, Peter points to a social hesitation that may precede and produce his lack of a fursona. This also suggests a certain social jumping-off point that the fursona represents—something that you only adopt when you are "really ready" to engage socially with other furries. This phenomenon is deeply interwoven with the fursona as a rite of passage and near-universal identification, such that it is not entirely inaccurate to say that "the fursona is everything."

Here I have collected a few accounts of the ways in which furries engage with processes of "queer becoming": encountering *moe*, entering the furry mediascape, and developing (or refraining from developing) a fursona. These processes call into question essentialist notions of selfhood and of being, just as McCallum and Tuhkanen argue a focus on becoming questions "the essential appeal, however strategic, of gay and lesbian identity politics" (2011: 10). The modes of queer becoming put forth in this chapter challenge the "essential appeal" of fandom belonging, of definitively *being furry*, demonstrating a queer virtual identity that, like our other identifies, are relational and always in flux.

Notes

[1] See also Galbraith (2019: 63), who refers to this as a "productive blurring of meaning" that took place accidentally in online discourse due to the peculiarities of Japanese character input methods on keyboards.

[2] Affection in the sense of "affect," in other words, phenomenology; not referring to a kind of fondness.

[3] These videos likely belong to a genre called "cringe compilations," a popular form of entertainment on YouTube and websites like Reddit with predominantly young male audiences. They offer a sort of schadenfreude resulting from the social miscues of others, while serving as reminders of the punishment viewers might incur if they behave in awkward or socially unacceptable ways.

Chapter 3. The Fursona's Messy Affective Embodiments

The fursona is a kind of virtual identity around which furries developed new modes of embodiment and intimacy. In this chapter I will explore a few of those modes. The fursona may be more or less identified with the "self," used as an external character or a representation of the interior; it may be used as a *subject* of collaborative artmaking (rather than an *object* as seen in the previous chapter), inducing new configurations of sexual intimacy; it may be realized physically in a costume and material performance; it may circulate as a part of furry popular culture; or it may leave identity behind and become a commodity. These do not cohere into any one way of being, rather constituting a queer mess of social interaction. Through these myriad modes of affective embodiment, I argue, the fursona is engaged in a continual process of "virtual worlding," borrowing from Martin Manalansan's (2013) concept of "queer worlding." Manalansan argues that through the messy behaviors, identities, and surroundings of urban queer people, they engage in worlding—a project of diverse spatializing practices that carve aspirational or speculative worlds in urban spaces. Worlding, he argues, like queerness, is "productively constituted by mess and disorder" (2013: 566). I argue that this mess and disorder can also produce worlding in the virtual realm. In this chapter, I attend to several of these messy practices, uncovering the stylized repetitions of furry performativity that make possible its project of virtual worlding.

Fursona as Self

My interlocutors report a wide range of identification with their fursonas, from seeing them as a strictly external character to seeing them as analogous to themselves. Sociologist T.L. Taylor

writes that in the virtual world of her study, users "fluctuate in their use of third and first person language to describe their experience" in avatars, and that they move between feeling the avatar is simply an extension of themselves to feeling that the avatar and its life is very much 'not like them'," (2002: 57). I have found the same to be true of furries and their fursonas, though the first person appears far more commonplace than the third. My field notes are full of quotes such as: "I'm a mystery roo"; "I'm macro[1] today"; and "I'm real happy with how I came out [in this drawing]". I typically only see third person language used when a furry is talking about or describing their fursona in order to specify its unique properties, often in the context of giving artists details for a commission. Though not in the commission context, my interlocutor Momiji uses the third person to describe his fursona in our interview:

> "Momiji was my first fursona. There wasn't much of a design process, I just wanted him to be a mimiga [fictional species] because I loved Cave Story at the time. He evolved a bit in appearance and character over time. He started out as a pirate because I really liked Pirates of the Caribbean at the time, which is a bit embarrassing in retrospect. Over time I dropped all that as he became more 'me' and less of a character I just used as an avatar."

Momiji specifically describes an evolution *toward* self-representation. This seems commonplace especially among furries who develop characters for roleplay, as they will initially create many characters for different roleplay scenarios, but one slowly evolves into their "main" character and eventually becomes a fursona that they use across multiple media. Momiji also relates that his fursona has become more stripped-down as it has come to be less of a separate character and more of an avatar representation of himself. I have seen this replicated across others' fursonas, which become reduced down to their simplest forms over time, losing certain characteristics or fashion accessories while exaggerating others.

Some furries will also switch fursonas at different periods in their life, as I allude to with my desire to switch to a cat fursona. One user in a group chat, Josh, writes, "i think over the course of my life there's been like 4 or more versions of me," describing different fursonas he has adopted throughout his fandom. As with Taylor's subjects, Josh switches between first and third person, as he also writes, "my fursona is a dad in dog years." Another user in the same chat, Tan, writes of his current fursona, "he wasnt my fursona back then […] i had the weird lizard dude," using both third person and possessive language to refer to his fursonas. Tan also has developed a unique lore for his fursona in a fictional world with several other characters, and in fact the "back then" in the prior quote refers to a time when he was publishing early lore about the character who would later become his fursona. Tan has created a specific and discrete lifeworld for his characters, who exist autonomously and independently of himself, through stories and comics. His adoption of one character as a fursona still always feels somehow more separated from the self than most fursonas, as his art postings always refer to that character in the third person. Because Tan's fursona is plucked from his own worlding project, nested within that of furry writ large, his engagements with the larger furry mediascape are always a sort of media crossover. This is another way that furries queer the virtual world: by creating discrete virtual worlds for their own characters and stories, impacting the broader culture with their own creative flourishes through their interactions with furries outside of those worlds.

Though many furries use first person language to enact embodiment, in only one conversation did one of my informants explicitly tell me that their fursona *is* them: Kissmekarma stated that she "liked being Sai more than anything since she is me." That was also in the context of discussing fursuits, of which Kissmekarma owns several. Others understand that, in the furry

imaginary, the fursona is theorized as a part or extension of the self; but find themselves having to negotiate this in daily life. My informant Puppypaws30 explains their rationale:

> "my charas are always intended to be me but i get bored easily and always want to play around, its almost like wanting to change outfits to me. some people take fursonas really seriously and so what i do is really against that unspoken furry code […] i never change behavior, i just change my icon. i usually decide based on how i feel and how i want to represent myself."

Here, Puppypaws30 both desires and rejects self-actualization through their fursonas. They may begin with an intent to represent themselves, but find themselves indecisive, frequently switching fursonas on a whim. Once again, fandom lore—the norm of a singular fursona that represents oneself—is upended in actual practice, a rupture that Puppypaws30 recognizes and acknowledges. Another of my informants, Rhumba, explicitly states that his fursona was never intended to represent himself: "I guess I stopped caring about actually representing myself at some point, or never cared to in the first place. […] It was just an avatar," he writes. Though an avatar is never "just" an avatar—as Taylor explains, avatar embodiment can spur changes in how we think and act about our corporeal embodiment (2002: 57)—I see Rhumba's statement as positioning his fursona as less integrated with his self-conception than he imagines the average furry does. For example, in everyday conversation, Rhumba is rarely found roleplaying as his fursona. Thus, the degree to which a furry identifies with their own fursona also influences the way they use and embody it. The degree of fursona performativity, in turn, produces different degrees of virtual worlding—while also leaving room in a furry's life for others; Rhumba is continually engaged in practices of textual poaching of lost or forgotten children's media; Puppypaws30 is continually

engaged in embodiments of non-fursona characters. This demonstrates that the fursona is simply one avenue for a broader queer virtual worlding project.

One platform through which fursonas frequently act as an analogue of the self is Twitter. For most furries on Twitter, all daily mundane activity is expressed through the visage of the fursona, from the personal to the political. Typically, furries accomplish this passively: with a Twitter icon and username. By merely displaying their fursona alongside their tweets in this way, furries conduct plenty of mundane interactions accompanied by the guise of their fursona. In fact, this appears to be the majority of content on my own Twitter timeline. Such interactions are frequently out-of-character insofar as furries are not performing their fursona, merely presenting interactions and remarks as any other Twitter user who might have a "real" name attached. This often leads to surprising examples of furry avatars entering the fray of political discourse, which Twitter is particularly attuned to. For example, one of my interlocutors recently got into an argument on Twitter with David Simon, creator of *The Wire* television show. This use of Twitter is not an uncommon sight. Some furries go as far as to actively campaign for political candidates with their fursona, as seen in the "Furries for Bernie" phenomenon that recently made headlines on San Francisco's KQED blog (Voynovskaya 2020). In these instances, the fursona is used not only as an extension of the self, but as an asset to help achieve furries' own political and life goals, queerly worlding the normatively "straight" terrains of politics and the water cooler.

Fursona as Interactive Art Subject

Some furries also operationalize their fursonas as interactive art subjects, leveraging both the real-time audience communication of social media platforms and the near universality of fursonas within the fandom to generate ideas for new artwork. Furry artist @microtransac on

Twitter often draws their own fursona Foster in giant or tiny form and inserts other furries' characters as the opposite size, fulfilling the micro/macro size-difference pairing. As the name may imply, micro/macro is a genre of furry artwork involving either an unusually giant character, an unusually tiny character, or both; a size difference which is accomplished by contrast with an environment or other characters in the scene. Sometimes this artwork is of a sexual nature, and the genre is often referred to as micro/macro *fetish*, but @microtransac and others frequently draw nonsexual micro/macro artwork. Due to the inherent need for contrast in micro/macro artwork, this genre lends itself particularly well to the use of the fursona as an interactive agent.

I have chosen a recent example of @microtransac's works that exemplifies this phenomenon, an art piece in reaction to social distancing and self-quarantine procedures introduced as a result of the 2020 coronavirus outbreak. This drawing fits partially within the genre of Your Character Here artwork (YCH), which @microtransac has also done more specifically on separate occasions. A typical YCH artwork is commercial in nature, structured as an auction, and will originate as a template drawing featuring simple silhouettes or outlines with predetermined poses in place of its subjects. These silhouettes (known as "slots") can then be replaced with characters once auction winners' character details are provided to the artist. @microtransac's quarantine drawing is not a commercial work but follows the general principle of YCH in their initial tweet, which consists of a sketch of macro Foster straddling a high-rise apartment building, crouching down to peer into a balcony where an anonymous micro (or perhaps average-sized) furry character is taking a cell phone photo. The micro furry in the balcony, along with several other characters peering out of their own windows or balconies, are all silhouetted anonymous figures—in other words, YCH slots. The caption accompanying the sketch reads, "Toss me refs i may add ur oc into this quarantine drawing" (@microtransac 2020a). "Refs" here is short for

"references" or "reference sheets," a common format for providing character details; OC stands for "original character," a category encompassing both fursonas and non-fursona characters. Foster, @microtransac's fursona, acts here as the primary subject of the work, but their action only becomes fully realized through *inter*action with the various OCs supplied in the replies. Though the work has not been completed as I write, a later tweet informs us of the progress: "this file looks nuts [right now]," writes @microtransac, captioning a screengrab of a live drawing stream in progress, the earlier sketch now entirely surrounded by a litany of characters in various art styles and reference formats (@microtransac 2020b). Thus, Foster and the rest of the OCs enter a relationship through the process of artmaking.

Other furry artists use the same type of interactive artwork engagement with the fursona to more explicitly sexual ends. Furry artist Denim recently created a Twitter thread suited to just this purpose, in which his fursona (a reindeer-rabbit hybrid) takes part in all manner of sexual activity with his followers. "Feelin slutty," the opening tweet reads, "Tell me (in reply or in DM) what you'd like to do to me, give me a ref if you've got one, and maybe I'll sketch it [heart emoji]" (@denimfurrysmut 2020). This text is accompanied by a nude drawing of Denim's fursona lustfully eyeing the viewer, knelt and visibly erect, his wrists bent in a begging-dog pose. Denim here playfully blurs the line between oneself and one's fursona: is it Denim the artist who feels slutty, or is it Denim the character? Moreover, is there a meaningful difference? Certainly, a sexual encounter in which Denim is roleplaying as his fursona ("what you'd like to do to *me*") can lead to a materially embodied sexual response. He offers up his fursona's body as an interactive sexual plaything, the resulting interactions realized in a series of sketches. Unlike @microtransac's drawing or YCH auctions, the other characters are not only being slotted into predetermined positions; rather, they are spelling out exactly what they want to do to or with Denim. Scrolling

down past his initial tweet, one can read of each resulting liaison and view a sketch of each fursona entangled in raunchy sex with Denim. The series runs the gamut from four-way upside-down fuckfests to a clothed peck on the cheek over a slice of pizza, reflecting both the variance in respondents' tastes and the range of acts Denim is willing to be subjected to.

These engagements show that the virtual body of the fursona can interact socially through artmaking—and through both non-sexual and sexual play, they demonstrate that the fursona does not only exist as a virtually embodied avatar, but also has ramifications in the material world. These material ramifications do not end at artmaking practices. As mentioned in the previous section, avatar embodiment can also lead to self-reflection and adoption of avatar traits in everyday human life. In material life, much like in furry artwork, I have found furries to be affectionate and cute-acting people upon meeting them in person. I see the prevalence of casual, non-sexual intimacy between furries (cuddling, nuzzling, petting, "scritching") as emblematic of this phenomenon. This sort of embodiment reverberates most clearly through an increasingly common activity among furry: costuming in fursuit, where the virtual performance of the fursona is truly made material.

Fursona as Costume

I would be remiss to write an entire thesis about fursonas without devoting some time to fursuits. Fursuits are the animal costumes that some furries (known as fursuiters) create and wear to conventions, in their homes, or around their neighborhoods. Look at any photographs of furry conventions and you will see them: brightly colored cartoon animal costumes with big heads and big paws, prancing around and merrily doling out hugs and waves to passersby. Their prominence as a part of furry convention culture is realized in an event called the "fursuit parade," wherein

fursuiters line up single-file and walk slowly through roped-off areas of the convention. This convention staple began at Pittsburgh's Anthrocon and has since spread to many other conventions. At Anthrocon itself, the line snakes outside, and the fursuit parade has become an event that attracts many local onlookers from the city, who arrive early to stake out viewing spots like they might for any holiday parade. This is a queer worlding in Manalansan's formulation most clearly realized: the urban space is transformed into a queer parade, spilling out messily from the convention space. No floats, no half-naked leather daddies, no corporate sponsors—instead, animal costumers walk slowly in single file, smiling and waving from their sweat-soaked custom fursuit interiors in the midwestern summer heat. This is a different beast than Pride and its ilk, a curious and queer spectacle that the city embraces with confusion.

Costuming allows one to express parts of their personality in physical space that they may not feel comfortable expressing otherwise. For example, my interlocutor Kissmekarma writes, "Sai is super outgoing and just a slight bit more goofy than I am normally (just something's you can get away with as an anonymous giant cat that a normal person cant)." Kissmekarma's use of the word "anonymous" is also telling, in that it reveals a position that becoming a character is anonymizing. In reality, fursuiting both does and does not anonymize the fursuiter. The fursuiter is still recognizable as the character, and if that character is strongly associated as a fursona of a specific furry, it is as good as wearing a badge with their handle on it. (It is a common experience among fursuiters to feel that they are "becoming myself" when they first put on a fursuit—in other words, becoming a character that they have embodied virtually for so long that it feels like an extension or piece of the self.) But the physical masking aspect of fursuiting can be revelatory for those with body dysmorphia or any kind of social anxiety, as it provides both a physical and psychic barrier from one's perceived vulnerabilities. Indeed, onlookers may never know what the person in the

costume looks like in their corporeal form. They may never even know the identity of the person under the fursuit, as "stealth fursuiting" is a fairly common and casual practice. Though I do not own a fursuit of my own, I have personally worn the fursuits of friends, even donning a badge with their name on it. I can literally become someone else, something materially possible only in the queer world of furry.

When in costume, it is difficult to speak loudly; one must project, and even then, the voice is muffled by foam and fur. As a result, many fursuiters choose to be mute when in suit, preferring gesture over speech. The use of gesture can also help overcome language barriers at larger conventions which may attract fursuiters who speak different languages from locals, or at intentionally international conventions such as Eurofurence. This problem can, of course, be entirely circumvented in audiovisual production with the use of microphones and overdubs, techniques frequently applied in fursuiters' content on online platforms such as YouTube and Twitch. However, to overcome this limitation in person, many fursuiters have developed unique styles of vocalization and noisemaking. A prominent example is the fursuiter Ino, whose fursona Telephone would, when appearing in fursuit form, vocalize using a modified component from a squeaky dog toy. I have personally witnessed Telephone at a number of conventions; this character is somehow at almost every single one. Ino's performance style in Telephone is that of a curious and playful creature, often found coveting and ferreting away with shiny objects. Though Ino would eventually abandon the squeaker in favor of self-devised chirping and chittering vocalizations, the modified dog toy squeaker has since become commonplace among fursuiters. In fact, there were so many squeakers at last year's FurFright in Connecticut that people began to complain, and I even encountered fursuiters being publicly chastised for squeaking too much. Other fursuiters have incorporated loudspeakers into their costumes so as to produce unique

vocalizations or play music wherever they go. These are sonically material traces of queer worlding that the fursuit engenders.

Perhaps owing to their spectacular nature as vibrant and meticulously crafted costumes, fursuits have received a potentially disproportionate amount of media coverage when it comes to the furry fandom. Many people conceive of the furry fandom as consisting entirely of fursuits and are unaware of its deeply rooted communal artmaking and virtual performance practices. However, I make this claim with the caveat that fursuits have been steadily rising in prominence over the past decade. Fifteen years ago, when I first encountered the furry subculture, fursuits were a mere footnote compared to visual art such as drawings and digital paintings. They were seen as representing a niche sub-group within the fandom, stigmatized by some as fetish gear that did not belong to the same world as furry art. Seven or eight years ago, when I first began self-identifying as a furry, this had shifted significantly, in that the worlds of costuming and two-dimensional art now mingled much more closely, the stigma having dissipated; several of the artist friends I made were also fursuit makers and wearers. Still, the "core" of the furry fandom seemed to center around the creation and circulation of visual art. In 2020, the "core" is no longer so clearly identifiable as belonging to a certain medium or another. Indeed, many of the most prominent furries known both inside and outside the fandom are fursuiters. Some of these fursuits have reached a level of awareness such that I would not hesitate to describe them as "furry popular culture."

Fursona as Furry Popular Culture

There are several ways in which certain fursonas can become known beyond the owner and their immediate peer group. Perhaps the most common method is through the popularity of a furry media personality (especially one with a fursuit) known for something other than their

fursona itself. One example of this is SonicFox, a professional esports player well known in the fighting game community (FGC). Their fursona, a blue fox, is known because of their prominence and many tournament victories in FGC. After being named "Esports Player of the Year" at The Game Awards 2018, SonicFox appeared onstage in fursuit, earning them significant viral buzz and praise from esports and furry communities alike (Alexandra 2018); they were even included in Forbes magazine's popular "30 Under 30" list for video games accompanied by an image of their fursuit (Perez and Cai 2019). SonicFox's publicized appearance in suit both raises the profile of furries more broadly and allows his fursona to circulate throughout the fandom. Other well-known fursonas include those of furry YouTubers such as Majira Strawberry, a red fox fursuiter who posts vlog and comedy skit videos, and those of Twitter personalities such as Asswolf, a brown dog fursuiter who engages in costumed antics with friends around Seattle and posts videos and memes of the results. To give a rough idea of their reach, Majira Strawberry has over 250,000 subscribers on YouTube, while Asswolf has over 17,000 Twitter followers. Their fursonas circulate through the dissemination of their self-produced media, as well as gifts from fans and guest appearances in media created by their friends.

Another way that fursonas can become part of furry popular culture is by appearing often in furry artwork. As the furry economy runs on art commissions, fursonas circulate throughout the fandom in commissioned works by prominent artists, which are then often reposted, retweeted, reblogged, and otherwise shared. The same goes for YCH auctions, art requests (when artists draw requested subject matter for free), and art trades (when artists draw for one another for free, typically drawing each other's fursonas). The example that first comes to my mind is Brokenwing, a furry with a fat green dragon fursona who has commissioned adult art of his dragon in all sorts of fetish scenarios from popular artists for nearly two decades. Specific kink sub-communities also

have their own examples of this, such as Hida, a furry with a blue dragon fursona who has commissioned hundreds of pieces of vorarephilia (also known as vore) artwork of their fursona. But commissions, art requests, art trades, and YCH auctions are not the only way that fursonas can circulate through making and sharing artwork. Some well-known fursonas have simply become popular because their owner is a prominent artist who draws their own fursona often. One example of this is artist RedRusker's Sea Salt character, a white Dalmatian with blue spots, who functions as RedRusker's fursona on social media but appears as a separate character in the fictional worlds of his popular gay porn comics. A search for "sea_salt" on the furry image board e621 brings up over 300 results, and he often appears in memes about furry porn; this fursona is perhaps the most prominent celebrity in the world of adult furry artwork.

In my introduction, I argue that furry culture has become less about places and more about people as Internet culture has shifted from niche interest websites to all-encompassing social media platforms. This would seem to increase the profile of celebrity fursonas within furry fandom, as influencer culture and social media algorithms converge on the subculture. However, when polling several group chats for suggestions about fursonas that have become part of furry popular culture, one user wrote back: "i want to say the 'my fursona is everywhere' thing feels like it was more common in the past." I argue that this is only true of the commission model of fursona popularity. The aforementioned mega-commissioners have slowed down significantly in recent years, and there do not seem to be many to take their place. Instead, what have taken their place are furry media personalities like SonicFox and Majira Strawberry, whose fursonas find their audience through a viral path to celebrity rather than through artist patronage and image circulation.

As well as individual fursonas operating on the level of popular culture, there exist also modes of expression and intimacy (as articulated through language) that have entered the realm of

popular culture among furries. Emoticons such as the :3 sideways cat face, the UwU upright animal face with eyes closed, the OwO face with eyes wide open—along with role-play interactions such as skritching (mutual grooming by scratching fur) and nuzzling—are all commonly shared among furries. These affective expressions mark furries as separate from outsiders, aiding in the virtual worlding project; by using them, a furry can be easily identified in a crowd. Much like fursuit embodiment, these expressions also produce a sort of shared affective disposition to act cute and silly, like a playful animal. These forms of alternative popular culture make visible the scope of furry worlding. They attract attention from outsiders, become Internet memes, and can eventually become part of global popular culture. When popular furries or furry expressions show up in other media, the distinction between the queerly virtual and the straightly actual is blurred.

Fursona as Commodity, or the Afterlife of a Fursona

Dibs was the fursona of an Australian friend whom I met online around 2014—an orange dingo character with a cartoonishly large snout, nose, paws, and haunches. My Australian friend, a professional cartoonist, commissioned a custom fursuit of Dibs from More Fur Less, who is a prominent on-demand fursuit maker. Around mid-2017, my friend began to change his username on various platforms and changed his icons to different species. That May, in order to fund a move, he listed the Dibs fursuit—and full rights to the character—up for auction. I was surprised to see him selling the dibs to Dibs, but it was not entirely out of the blue as he had already adopted a new fursona. After the auction was completed, a new Twitter account called @DibsDingo was opened by the character's new owners (two furries who live in the United States). The former fursona was now merely a character, with a new personality and new owners. It is perhaps akin to an intellectual property in the media industry, continuously reinvented by new producers. Though I was not able

to get in touch with the original owner of Dibs, I did reach out to one of the new owners, Kissmekarma, who informs me:

> "I had seen the suit vaguely in con photos online, but I didn't really know too much about the character or the suit.[…] I'm only 5'2 so finding suits more on the smaller range is different, at the time I went in on it, it was a really low price. […] Judging from what I received from the character and the images used to post for auction (along with the design) we usually portrayed him as a big old toon, we got silly props for him and everything, [the other owner] has defined him, since I didn't end up wearing him much (I had 3 other suits at the time lol)"

Kissmekarma reveals that while she was initially interested in the promise of a suit that fits her frame at a low price, she and the other owner still wanted to remain faithful to the character as previously imagined. The identity that was once a person's fursona becomes abstracted into a set of character traits, reconfigurable and rearrangeable for performance and even, as the photographs show, physical modification. I also include the detail that Kissmekarma owned three other suits to drive home that the fact that Dibs has become one of many in a collection, cooperatively owned and inhabited.

This case study provides insight into how a fursona can have a life outside of its original "owner," or the material human whose identity it is linked to. This experience is not limited to this case study either; I am aware of at least one other case in which a fursuit of someone's fursona was sold as a character, though I was unable to track down the new owner. Like the fursona circulation discussed in the previous section, the afterlife of a fursona involves the virtual (or physical) movement of the character outside of the profiles and artwork of its original inhabitant. Even after a furry has left their fursona behind, it will live on the servers of websites and platforms,

on the hard drives of art collectors, and at times on the body of an entirely different furry. The furry worlding project moves and churns through these commodification and archival processes.

Furries are engaged in queering networked identity, which is typically either imagined as entirely constructed in the virtual (as in a virtual world) or simply reflective of the material (as in social media). As the relations and behaviors described in this chapter reveal, the fursona crosses boundaries of material and virtual. Manalansan argues that queer worlding "offers provocative trajectories and itineraries for urban world-making," (2013: 571). The numerous and messy ways that furries embody fursonas similarly offer new, queer trajectories for the imaginary of virtual space. Rather than carving out space in the urban world, virtual worlding creates alternative social arrangements that span multiple sites of action across Internet platforms, formal virtual worlds, and geographic boundaries. They resist platform dependence while producing a vast terrain of affective states, interpersonal behaviors, and traces both material and virtual.

Notes

[1] "Macro" here refers to unusually giant characters, so "I'm macro today" means "I'm giant today." I explain micro/macro further later in this chapter.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

The furry fandom is a heterogenous and vast assemblage of people, things, ways of being and making meaning. This project has attempted to chart a number of these aspects in a way that articulates their power in queering fandom, queering processes of becoming, and queering relation and identities in the space of the virtual. Furries question the fundamental assumption in fandom studies of a textual object of fandom, pushing ideas of reading and reception to the background. Furries also create a queer sex public within fandom that has flourished despite a period of contention and strife. In the creation of the fursona, furry fandom produces routes of queer becoming through *moe* affection, which unlocks the potential of the virtual body as a site of affective power. Further, the relational and fluid aspects of identity are made clear as processes of roleplay and collaborative artmaking are utilized in fursona identity construction. All of these processes lead to the creation of new affective dispositions and behaviors, which continuously construct a messy terrain of virtual worlding across platforms and boundaries. Thus, furries are continuously engaged in displacement: they displace textual objects of fandom; they displace the becoming subject from essential notions of being; they displace networked identity from fixed states; and they displace processes of worlding from the urban to the virtual. These displacements, in part through their refusal to cohere, make life playfully furry.

Directions for Further Study

As foreshadowed by the furry sex wars, there is a dark side to contemporary furry sexual culture. Strife abounds in the endless arguments over what artwork is or is not morally suspect, resulting far too often in furry artists being publicly named and shamed for wrongdoing over what

amounts to the subject matter of fantasy. Furries are quick to draw sharp lines in the sand, performing a sort of socially severing boundary work by attempting to publicly excommunicate artists who draw the "wrong" kind of art. If all of this sounds impassioned to the point of distortion, it is because this exact occurrence has happened to several of my close friends, and it is difficult to extricate myself from those experiences. Similar phenomena have been discussed in the context of slash fic (Ríos and Rivera 2018), but this subject requires more study in several contexts, including furry.

A second consideration that warrants further study in the furry context is that of difference and (human) identity, especially along race, class, and gender lines. Though furry is by and large a progressive group, it is also mostly male and almost entirely white (over 80% according to FurScience 2019)—and I have no solid data on class demographics.[1] I have found that furry has been increasingly friendly to women and gender-nonconforming folks, and that furries generally stand in solidarity with people of color, but it is still overwhelmingly white, and that whiteness must be felt by furries of color. One example is the troubling relationship that furry has had to the appropriation of indigenous and Native American imagery, as they are perceived as connected to animism and anthropomorphism. Thankfully, as of late, any essentializing or coopting depictions of indigeneity have prompted widespread criticism and knowledge-sharing; literacy around these issues has improved significantly. I have also witnessed some of the ways in which furries of color have made themselves known, carved out spaces for themselves, and created content that speaks to their lived experiences in ways that have greatly benefited the fandom as a whole. For example, black furries have flourished on Twitter, including many who demonstrate the ways in which black cultural modes can be expressed through writing and fursona character design. These articulations

of furry fandom are worth exploring as they expose and disrupt the pervasive social inequities that persist even in furry's radical queer worlding project.

A Personal Note

As I mention in my introduction, this project is deeply personal. That has also come with some degree of discomfort that I feel is worth discussing. Until entering graduate school, I had always felt compelled to keep my furry life separate from the rest of my life. I set clear boundaries between private and public: I never even discussed about this part of my life with my family, with my school or work friends, or with my music-related friends. Some boundaries still exist, of course, as I have not revealed my furry handle and I would prefer if my furry interactions could remain in the queer world of the fandom, judged by furry norms rather than those of society writ large. But disclosing my involvement in the furry fandom to anyone outside of that safe space is something that I would never have considered until very recently.

Even now, I still feel discomfort when talking about furry things with the aforementioned groups of people. Part of this, of course, is because I have refrained from talking about furry in the past, so it is almost like uncovering a shadow self about which I have to negotiate disclosures. A second part is simply social anxiety, which I have struggled with my whole life. And a third part is some residual shame from the stigma that furries have been subjected to. I simply cannot shake this fear of being ridiculed, no matter how strongly I believe that there is nothing to be ashamed of. It is similar to feelings I had about coming out to my friends and, eventually, parents as queer— ultimately, a series of awkward lurches that resulted in some lasting trauma. Perhaps this thesis is, in part, a way for me to work through my own fears about disclosing this part of my life. Of course, the primary purpose of this paper is to contribute to the field of media studies by providing the

furry account of queer virtual worlding, to work towards new understandings of sociality and

identity as mediated by Internet technology. But perhaps if I have made this part of my life

somehow legible, then I may also share the pleasures it has brought me, my friends, and my

interlocutors.

Notes

[1] Though FurScience does collect data on the income of convention attendees, this is likely to skew much higher than the income of all furries when non-con-attending furries, who cannot afford the travel and lodging costs that a convention requires, are included.

Works Cited

Alexandra, Heather. 2018. "SonicFox Steals The Show At The Game Awards." *Kotaku* (blog). December 7, 2018. https://kotaku.com/sonicfox-steals-the-show-at-the-game-awards-1830927795.

American Booksellers Ass'n, Inc. v. Hudnut. 1985, 771 F.2d 323.

Annett, Sandra. 2014. *Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

@artdecaderoo. 2018. "Twitter Post." *Twitter* (blog). April 8, 2018. https://twitter.com/artdecaderoo/status/983081114783961088.

Azuma, Hiroki. 2009. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono. English ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1998. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 547–66.

Blueballs. 2013. *Your First Crush*. Digital artwork. https://www.furaffinity.net/view/11605426/.

Boellstorff, Tom. (2008) 2015. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. New Edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Borrows, Bill. 1998. "Heavy Petting." *Loaded*, March 1998. Reprinted on Ian Stradling's website; archived on The Wayback Machine. http://web.archive.org/web/20080218162550/http://www.faradawn.demon.co.uk/articles/loaded.htm.

Burke, Heidi (dir.). 2018. "Furry Nation." *This Is Life with Lisa Ling*. CNN.

Carlson, Marla. 2011. "Furry Cartography: Performing Species." *Theatre Journal* 63 (2): 191–208.

Condry, Ian. 2013. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Experimental Futures. Durham: Duke University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. (1980) 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

DeMello, Margo. 2012. *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press.

@denimfurrysmut. 2020. "Twitter Post." *Twitter* (blog). March 16, 2020. http://web.archive.org/web/20200317001353/https://twitter.com/denimfurrysmut/status/1239702459787829248.

Dierckxsens, Geoffrey. 2017. "The Hermeneutical Animal: Making Sense of Animal Otherness 'in the Flesh.'" In *The Animal Inside: Essays at the Intersection of Philosophical Anthropology and Animal Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Dierckxsens, Rudmer Bijlsma, Michael Begun, and Thomas Kiefer, 179–95. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Donaldson, Kayleigh. 2018. "Foxy: Why Everyone Has a Crush on Disney's Robin Hood." *SYFY Fangrrls* (blog). May 8, 2018. https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/foxy-why-everyone-has-a-crush-on-disneys-robin-hood.

Duggan, Lisa, and Nan D. Hunter. 2006. *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge.

Galbraith, Patrick W. 2014. *The Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.

———. 2019. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Galen, FoxWolfie. 1998. "A Disturbing Webpage," October 7, 1998. https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.lifestyle.furry/ouu2CVmNI_s.

Gilly, Casey. 2016. "C. Spike Trotman." In *She Changed Comics: The Untold Story of the Women Who Changed Free Expression in Comics*, edited by Betsy Gomez and Maren Williams, 151–53. Berkeley, CA: Image Comics.

Hebdige, Dick. (1979) 2002. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

Henry, Sarah Marie. 2013. "Furries, Fans and Feminism: Querying and Queering the Furry Fandom." Master's Thesis, San Francisco, CA: San Francisco State University.

Hongo, Hudson. 2016. "This Dominatrix Deer Dancing at an '80s Furry Convention Is What the Internet Is All About." *Gizmodo* (blog). 2016. https://gizmodo.com/this-dominatrix-deer-dancing-at-an-early-furry-conventi-1787904003.

Jeansonne, Sherry A. 2012. "Breaking Down Stereotypes: A Look at the Performance of Self-Identity Within the Furry Community." Master's Thesis, San Marcos, TX: Texas State University, San Marcos. https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/4398.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2007. "Afterword: The Future of Fandom." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, First Edition, 357–64. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Lester, Paul R. 1994. "Re: Duckon," June 5, 1994. https://groups.google.com/forum/#!original/alt.fan.furry/JnB26dhUJ4M/PHaTChTLP2YJ

Maase, Jakob W. 2015. "Keeping the Magic: Fursona Identity and Performance in the Furry Fandom." Master's Thesis, Bowling Green, KY: Western Kentucky University. http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1512.

Manalansan, Martin F. 2015. "Queer Worldings: The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York." *Antipode* 47 (3): 566–79.

McCallum, E. L., and Mikko Tuhkanen, eds. 2011. *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

@microtransac. 2020a. "Twitter Post." *Twitter* (blog). March 17, 2020. http://web.archive.org/web/20200318012533/https://twitter.com/microtransac/status/1240079236288970753.

———. 2020b. "Twitter Post." *Twitter* (blog). March 19, 2020. http://web.archive.org/web/20200320033500/https://twitter.com/microtransac/status/1240812737170673664.

O'Furr, Patch. 2018. "Puppy Play Incident at Furry Weekend Atlanta – Is That OK in Public? (Part 1)." *Dogpatch Press* (blog). April 10, 2018. https://dogpatch.press/2018/04/10/puppy-play-furry-weekend-atlanta/.

Patten, Fred. (1997) 2012. "Retrospective: An Illustrated Chronology of Furry Fandom, 1966–1996." *Flayrah* (blog). 2012. http://www.flayrah.com/4117/retrospective-illustrated-chronology-furry-fandom-1966-1996.

———. 2014. *Funny Animals and More: From Anime to Zoomorphics*. Edited by Bob McLain. Theme Park Press.

———. 2017. *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Perez, Matt, and Kenrick Cai. 2019. "30 Under 30 In Games 2020: The Indies And Innovators Influencing How We Game." *Forbes* (blog). December 3, 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattperez/2019/12/03/30-under-30-in-games-2020-the-indies-and-innovators-influencing-how-we-game/#4264c68a752d.

Plante, Courtney N., Stephen Reysen, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen C. Gerbasi. 2016. *FurScience! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project*. Waterloo, Ontario: FurScience. http://furscience.com/publications/.

———. 2019. "Research Findings." FurScience. 2019. http://furscience.com/research-findings/.

Ríos, Alen, and Diego Rivera. 2018. "Vulnerability and Trash: Divisions Within the Stucky Fandom." *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6 (1): 11–34.

Rodriguez, Dominic (dir.). 2016. *Fursonas*. Documentary. Gravitas Ventures.

Sachiko, Kaneoya. 2019. *The Art of Kaneoya Sachiko*. Chicago, IL: Iron Circus Comics.

Sandvoss, Cornel. 2005. *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

———. 2017. "The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, Second Edition, 29–44. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Silverman, Ben. 2018. "Fan Labor in the Participatory Archive: A Study of a Private BitTorrent Tracker." Undergraduate honors thesis, Providence, RI: Department of Music, Brown University.

Simo. 2006. "This Judgemental Little Business: One Very Pissed off Furry Fan Has a Go at Defining 'Furry.'" *Furrydolphin.Net* (blog). 2006. http://www.furrydolphin.net/2006_files/why-us-furries.html.

Sjöberg, Lore. 2002. "The Geek Hierarchy." The Brunching Shuttlecocks. 2002. https://web.archive.org/web/20160710215816/http://brunching.com/geekhierarchy.html.

Stanfill, Mel. 2013. "'They're Losers, but I Know Better': Intra-Fandom Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30 (2): 117–34.

Strike, Joe. 2017. *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture*. Jersey City, NJ: Cleis Press.

Taylor, T.L. 2002. "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds." In *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, edited by Ralph Schroeder, 40–62. Computer-Supported Cooperative Work. London: Springer-Verlag.

Trotman, Charla. 1998. "This Sordid Little Business: One Embarrassed 'Furry Fan' Has a Go at Defining 'Furry.'" September 1998. https://archive.is/THhM8.

Turkle, Sherry. 1994. "Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 1 (3): 158–67.

VCLWiki contributors. 2008. "Content Rules." VCLWiki. October 12, 2008. https://web.archive.org/web/20100611211138/http://us.vclart.net/wiki/Content_Rules.

Voynovskaya, Nastia. 2020. "A Secret Weapon of the Progressive Left: Furries." *KQED* (blog). February 28, 2020. https://www.kqed.org/arts/13875328/a-secret-weapon-of-the-progressive-left-furries.

Waller, Reed, and Kate Worley. 1995. *The Collected "Omaha": The Cat Dancer*. Vol. 1. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.

Wikifur contributors. 2018. "Burned Furs." Wikifur. September 11, 2018.
        http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Burned_Furs.

———. 2019. "List of Conventions by Attendance." Wikifur. December 8, 2019.
        https://en.wikifur.com/w/index.php?title=List_of_conventions_by_attendance&oldid=51
        8064.

Yamato, Jen. 2016. "Exposing the David Miscavige of Furries." *The Daily Beast* (blog). May 5,
        2016. https://www.thedailybeast.com/exposing-the-david-miscavige-of-furries.