

On Being Furry in Furry Places

Courtney “Nuka” Plante, Bishop’s University

Stephen Reysen, Texas A&M University

Sharon Roberts, Renison University College, University of Waterloo

Kathleen Gerbasi, Niagara County Community College

Many furries dedicate significant proportions of their life to being furry: Recent data collected by the Furscience team in 2024 at conventions across North America and Europe and in online samples found that the average furry has been a furry for 10.3 years. Our prior work (e.g., Plante et al., 2023) also suggests that, in addition to being important for furries, this identity is nuanced and multifaceted, often including one’s sense of self (actual and ideal), their social support network, recreation and escapism from daily life, their muse and an opportunity for self-expression, and even their livelihood.

Recent studies have added a new layer of complexity to the mix: fluctuations in the wake of convention attendance. Longitudinal results from a 2024 study of European convention-going furs assessed their furry identification in the weeks before and after a convention, as well as at the convention itself. The study distinguished between different facets of one’s furry identity, such as the distinction between fanship (the extent of one’s fan-like identification with furry content), fandom (the extent of one’s identification with the broader furry community), and fursona identification (the extent to which one feels attached to their fursona). Results found that fanship scores increased at the furry convention, relative to baseline scores, before dropping to levels that remained higher than baseline scores, suggesting that attending a furry convention may increase one’s sense of being a “furry fan.” In contrast, fursona identification scores, while increasing at a convention, returned to baseline scores after the convention. When it comes to fandom scores, they were only affected by the convention for furries who were above the median when it came to length of time being a furry: These furs experienced an increase in fandom scores at the convention which persisted after the convention.

Far from being a trivial or pedantic distinction, differences such as these (fanship vs. fandom) have important practical implications. For example, consistent with prior research (Plante et al., 2023), the same study also found that fandom scores were more strongly tied to psychological well-being than were fanship scores. And, given the important role that social support networks play in psychological well-being, and given the opportunity that furry conventions provide for the fostering of such networks, it is hardly surprising that the same longitudinal study found that furries who spent their time at the convention engaged in social activities (e.g., hanging out with friends, attending dances) were the most likely to stave off “post-con depression”.

In sum: In addition to being complex and multifaceted, furry identity is also dynamic, shifting in response to furry-related events like conventions. While it’s easy to trivialize the complexities of furry identity as pedantic hair-splitting, our research suggests that these are, indeed, differences that make all the difference when it comes to well-being,

with implications for technology like VRChat and social media that affords more furries the opportunity to “be furry” in the droughts between furry conventions or when convention attendance is not possible.

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I Bark, Therefore I Am: The creation of the fursona and its representation of identity in the furry fandom

Reuben Mount, Birmingham City University

The furry fandom has arguably been around since the 1970s; yet scant research has been done around the group. The first published work into the fandom was in 2007 (Gerbasi, et al.) and since then the academic discourse has begun to uncover the finer details of the community. The furry fandom behaves similarly to other fan groups in many ways such as: the display of fan identification (Dietz-Uhler and Lanter, 2008); the use of gift economies (Scott, 2009); and the acts of fan creation (Hetrick, 2019). However, there are elements of the furry fandom as a fan group that cause them to stand out from the herd.

One such example is the fursona, an anthropomorphic animal character of a participant’s own design that represents them within furry spaces. Although this could be described as an avatar, being an embodiment of the space’s user (Boberg, et al., 2008), I argue that the fursona moves beyond this definition as it is not merely a digital representation of the user to facilitate communication (Nowak and Fox, 2018) as avatars are usually discussed, although this can be for some participants in the furry fandom. Instead, the fursona as an avatar is used in all furry spaces regardless of offline or online contexts.

This paper will examine the fursona as a key aspect of furry identity, specifically focusing on the creation and development of this form of fan identification. First, I will address the necessity and universality of the fursona as a component of furry identity. Next, as the fursona is created across digital and physical spaces, the generation of this through interactions in online space and galvanisation of furry identity through the performance of “being furry” will be discussed. Finally, I will highlight the complexity of defining or otherwise codifying the fursona and the importance of understanding this for the furry fandom itself.

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Survival Under Authority: Identity Boundaries of Chinese Furrıes

Li Yiming, Peking University

When discussing furry, it is natural that we rarely think of China. This is partly because of the firewall, which prevents most Chinese (including furrıes) from making their voices heard on international social media, like Twitter. However, China has a large group of furrıes, which is expanding (Xinquan Niu, 2019). How Chinese furrıes view their identities closely relates to the question: What is Furry?

According to my research, the boundaries of Chinese furrıes' identities are shaped under cultural pressure because of the enormous power of government in cultural life. The Chinese government has always emphasized the mainstream in its cultural life, whether socialist values or collectivism. However, when it comes to cultural diversity, it prefers to create a "blossoming" scene, meaning every culture can flourish, whether mainstreamed or not, as claimed by Mao Zedong (1956). The authority's handling of the relationship between mainstream culture and subculture has always been contradictory, and this is not just the case in China. As an essential theoretical source of subcultural studies, the Birmingham School conducted excellent research on the

relationship between subcultures and mainstream UK culture (Hall, 1980). Although the theories of the Birmingham School are mostly considered outdated, they did show the opposition between the two cultural groups.

In this research, I draw upon the concept of *Resistance* from the Birmingham School. This concept helps to illuminate how the furry fandom in China navigates its relationship with mainstream culture. I refer to this relationship as *Passive Resistance*, which furries' identity boundaries hide behind. Based on in-depth interviews, I try to show how Chinese furries negatively protect their cultural identities. They will use a range of strategies when talking with those who are not furry, like rationalizing furry fandom's characteristics, which are discriminated against by mainstream culture, denying the existence of the "circle" (in Chinese, it means certain groups of fans of fandom), do not mention one's furry identity positively.

Chinese furries try hard to describe furry fandom as a culture that conforms to mainstream values, like emphasizing that "furry fandom is positive energy (a concept first popularized in 2012 by Xi Jinping)". However, mainstream culture does not see them as one of its own. Furry fandom is in a position to be gazed at, which means its existence is not only determined by itself but also shaped by the gaze of mainstream culture.

Gazing and being gazed at represents the imbalance of powers between both. Chinese furries are trying to recognize who they are in their adjustment strategies and seek more significant growth. Growing under authority is difficult, and the boundary of Chinese furries' identities is fuzzy and complex.

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The Past and the Present of the Fandom in East Asia: Cases of Japan and China

Tomohiro Inokuchi, Keio University

Yunfan Mao, University of Tokyo

Midoriko Hayashi, Nagoya University

Today, the Furry Fandom has expanded globally. Although its primary language is English, largely due to its origins in the United States, there are local communities in Europe, Central and South America, and Asia where participants primarily speak languages other than English. Particularly in some East Asian communities, there are significant differences not only geographically or linguistically (many people communicate in the fandom without using English) but also culturally. For instance, the “ケモノ” (Kemono) fandom in Japan, while overlapping with the Western furry fandom, has a different origin and history related to Japan’s unique manga/anime culture.

To East-Asian fans, some of whom call themselves “ケモナー” (Kemonor) in Japanese or “獸迷” (Shoumi) in Chinese, how many researchers have paid attention? Previous research on the furry fandom spans various fields, from social psychology studies by the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (since 2011) focusing on participants’ identities and characteristics, to aesthetic studies by Dunn (2022) on content like costumes and animal art, and even sexuality and queer studies by Heinz (2020) and Silverman (2020). However, most of these studies—other than exceptions such as Inokuchi (2013) or Mao (2022)—have focused on Western fandoms or English speakers, overlooking practices in different regions. Many things remain to be investigated and elucidated.

This panel aims to elucidate the local, global, and transnational practices of fandom participants, with a particular focus on those in East Asia. First, Inokuchi will summarize the history and present situation of the fandom in Japan through comparison to the US, with a sociological interest in stigmatization and media exposure. Second, Mao will investigate the cultural practices of Furies/Shoumi in China, considering the dynamism of creating “bodies” as animal characters. Third, Hayashi will examine the characteristics of Kemonors by looking at the consumption of various animal characters in contemporary Japan, distinguishing them from ordinary animal character fans. Through these discussions, this panel will present new perspectives on the Furry Fandom as both a global and a local phenomenon and demonstrate the significance of paying attention to the diverse realities of those participating and practicing in the fandom. This will not only help in understanding the global expansion and local adaptation of the furry fandom but also reveal the complexities of cultural exchange and integration.

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Furry games, more-than-human perspectives, and ludic relationality

Xavier Ho, Monash University

The term ‘fandom’ aptly encapsulates the essence of the furry scene, which is characterised by the production and consumption of media within a community who self-describe as the furry fandom. The community comprises people who are fans of each other’s works in animalistic anthropomorphism and identify with animals (Strike 2023). The advent of independent games and the availability of free and open-source game design tools have led to a surge in the popularity of furry games within this community. For instance, *Minotaur Hotel* (2019), a pay-what-you-want gay visual novel, has amassed an active player base, as evidenced by the quarter of a million downloads to date. Game designers I interviewed about furry game design shared the observation that furrles are ‘extremely engaged with our games’.

This paper draws from nine furry voices out of forty interviews conducted on queer game design. The interviews reveal that furry narratives in games are intrinsically queer and offer unique opportunities to engage with queer theory that cannot be realised with human-centred perspectives. Furry games provide a ludic lens through which to understand furry culture and the pluralistic experiences of being furry and embodying a fursona (Zaman 2024). My interviews detail how furry characters can widen and expand human perspectives, and allow game designers to quickly variegate character archetypes to convey narrative stakes to the audience. Furthermore, furrles serve as powerful storytelling vehicles to explore queerness in both digital and local cultures.

Critically, this research contributes new evidence to the precarious nature of labour in the games industry (Ruberg 2019), particularly in passion-driven projects like making

furry games. Despite the relative success of many of the games selected for this research, financial sustainability remains a significant challenge for independent game designers. As a case study, I point to the recent announcement of League of Geeks, creator of the digital board game *Armello* (2015), that they are going ‘into hibernation for the foreseeable future’ to unpack the dependencies and impacts of public, private, and crowdfunding. My investigation underscores the transitory and staggered strategies employed by furry game designers to secure funding and sustain their collaboration with other furies in game production.

This paper forms part of a book project aimed at deepening our understanding of queer game design. The furry community, which is predominantly non-heterosexual, highly neurodivergent, and known for its openness, inclusivity, and support for newcomers (Reysen and Plante 2023) represents a large, dedicated, and growing audience for furry games. The intersection of furry, queerness, and games presents a compelling site for studying both furry culture and digital queer culture. I argue that the tendency of furry games to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality brings them closer together, creating a playful, fuzzy, and avowed narrative through queer, trans, and multicultural relationality. I term this form of videogame storytelling as *ludic relationality* and aim to explore the extent to which furry games can inherently both deconstruct and construct anthropogenic experiences, thereby arriving at a new understanding of how we relate to one another.

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Fostering Communication and Building Support Networks through Interaction with Art, Specific to the Furry Fandom

Carrie Gonzales and Joelle Pulver, The Moms of Furrries

Our presentation delves into how the profound impact of artistic expression and mutual consumption of art within the furry fandom — a community built upon common interests in anthropomorphized animals — can assist in the journey of self-discovery, improve interpersonal communication, and provide a foundation on which to build strong support networks.

The furry fandom provides a welcoming space for personal exploration and identity development, offering individuals the opportunity to reflect on and embrace their true selves. It allows for varying levels of participation, from casual exploration to full immersion into a unique lifestyle and career. Creating a fursona can help interested individuals delve into their inner selves, explore different facets of their identity, and express idealized traits, aspirations, and aspects of their personality. Artistic expression within the furry fandom serves as a valuable means of emotional expression and exploration. Through various art forms such as drawing, writing, costuming, and performance, individuals can externalize and process complex emotions, providing therapeutic benefits and facilitating emotional understanding and articulation.

The community aspect of the furry fandom fosters mutual support, acceptance, and validation among like-minded peers. It offers a welcoming space where diversity is celebrated, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. The cultural and creative impact of the furry fandom is reflected in a rich tapestry of creative works that challenge and expand mainstream cultural narratives while promoting a culture of creativity and acceptance. Furthermore, the furry fandom promotes communication, connection, and trust, particularly among adolescents navigating their individuality and independence. It provides unique topics of discussion that can strengthen communication, maintain connection, and strengthen relationships, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing artistic expression within the furry fandom as a powerful example of how it fosters personal and collective growth.

In conclusion, this presentation underscores the significance of artistic expression within the furry fandom and its potential to enrich lives, improve communication, and strengthen support networks, pointing towards the transformative power of artistic expression within this unique community.

Revisiting Popular Songs through a Furry Lens

Ian Martyn, Independent Scholar

The advent of software like VRChat that supports the creation and manipulation of furry avatars in prebuilt world settings has ushered in a landscape of furry music videos that have exploded in popularity among furry audiences in recent years. These music videos feature new video content to accompany songs made primarily by non-furries, often crafting new stories in which viewers can comprehend the original meanings of the songs. By centering gay male relationships prominently in these videos, these furry creators have recontextualized the meanings of the original songs to fit within a primarily queer milieu, taking them out of the mostly heteronormative context in which they were originally intended to be understood.

Through an examination of specific videos by furry music video creators such as Danny Grey, Changa Husky, and Ursa, I intend to illuminate, through the lenses of ethnomusicology and queer studies, the ways in which furry VR music video creators increase gay visibility while simultaneously elevating the image of the furry fandom in the popular eye. I hope to demonstrate how these videos provide space for queer or questioning people to see themselves reflected in popular media that would not otherwise be possible as well as highlighting how this phenomenon is possible primarily through the usage of furry avatars in VRChat and similar software.

Furry Art in the Expanded Field: Creative Research Presentations by Furry Artists

Auryn (Brett Hanover)

Atmus (Tommy Bruce)

Theory (Zephyr Kim)

From its origins as a media fandom, furry has developed into a distinct subculture with its own social codes, vocabulary, economy, folklore, and modes of intimacy. Art holds a central position in this culture, with the work of thousands of independent artists shaping and transforming the way furry identity is experienced and shared. As furries, we form bonds based on shared mythologies from comics and fan-fiction, and we experiment with aesthetic technologies like fursonas and fursuits to articulate our identities. The furry community might itself be considered a work of art, as our creative practices and social structures continue to evolve through intuition and collaboration. Our panel posits that the creative and unconventional research practices of furry artists should be highlighted at this inaugural Furry Studies conference.

We are a group of three furry artists – filmmaker Auryn, photographer Atmus, and mixed-media artist Theory – who share a concern for the emerging practices which are extending the notion of furry art into exciting, unknown territories. In particular, more and more furry artists are creating work in conversation with the fine art world(s), queer

culture, and academia, bringing furry aesthetics and experiences to bear on the critical discourses of the contemporary avant-garde. There are pool toys in the white cube, and theorists in the lobby. What does it mean when our aesthetics reach new audiences who lack furry frames of reference? What can furry artists and scholars learn from one another, as we bring challenging ideas into our fandom and reveal ourselves to the outside world? Where is furry art headed, and what can it accomplish?

Feeling Otherwise: A Phenomenological Exploration of Fursona Embodiment for Queer and Trans Furies

Hazel Ali Zaman, Portland State University/Pacific Lutheran University

This academic paper seeks to share the results of a recent on-going phenomenological study on queer and trans fursona embodiment while also opening a dialogue with furies about their experiences with fursona embodiment, specifically focusing on its impact on individual well-being. The study being presented focuses on what being a furry feels like for queer and trans people, and from those feelings what benefits do individuals have when feeling furry, or feeling *otherwise*. In this study I understand furry spaces and places as sites where one is able to perform a different way of being and to make sense of how one interacts with themselves and those around them in unusual and strange, or queer, ways. In addition to the individual, the study conceptualizes furry spaces and places as stages for alternative performances and wilder worldmaking practices that attempts to engage with *otherwise* ways of being for the individual. In other words, *otherwise* is used in this study to name the attempt to actualize what was at first thought to be impossible within domesticated, or neoliberal and late-stage capitalist, frameworks that continually seeks to violently limit and erase queer and trans life. *Otherwise* therefore names the playground where queer and trans people make sense of themselves and each other in wilder ways, and feeling *otherwise* is a way for many to gain power and autonomy within a state of queer and trans violence. The study therefore suggests that furry spaces and places are empowering stages for performing an *otherwise* sense of self within a community that continues to thrive both online and offline despite violent and unforgiving forces that fuel contemporary state-sanctioned assaults on queer and trans life. This study's conceptualization of sensing and feeling queerly is rooted in José Esteban Muñoz's understanding of "queerness as a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality" (1996, p. 6) and how affective particularities can be "descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt" (2006, p. 677). The study therefore focuses on sensing and feeling to examine the way in which our senses are used to create a relate to the world around us, and in this case how furies make sense of their feelings through the fursona. In other words, "the senses are how we experience, know, and relate interior to exterior worlds, the self to others" which when explored can "describe the politics of being with and being together-in-difference" (Muñoz, 2020, p. x).

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Debating Furry's Archive: Reorienting Historical Research of the Queerness of Fandom's Many Performances

Brandy J. Lewis, Cal State University

Developing from research in the field of Archive Studies and questions pertaining to queer histories' documentation, "Debating Furry's Archive" bridges an autoethnographic method with the study of speculative fiction and fantasy as history. Rather than looking to a singular text or orientation within furry, I argue that fans and fan critics should instead consider the textuality of history formation, what its sequencing ultimately silences, and how a multidisciplinary engagement with fiction can offer new directions when thinking about fandom's dimensional operations. This project accordingly thinks with the work of scholars Carolyn Dinshaw, Tavia Nyong'o, Kadji Amin, and Matt Richardson respectively, figures who in their own fields have noted the way that historical treatises and representations leave out certain dimensions for power, dignity, or otherwise. Extending scholar Alexis Lothian contention that speculative fiction has allowed "oppressed populations and deviant individuals" to put tension on "the consequences of the present as [they] seek to change it," I locate furry literature as one site of documenting "an alternate archive when collective memory falters," as Richardson unpacks in *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* ("Introduction" 2; "Introduction" 11).

While furry has grown from its early respective days of theorizing with and alongside the anthropomorphic, otherwise funny animal aesthetic and figure, fiction continues to be a little examined form both within and around the community. Similarly, whereas media both social and documentary have tried attending to fans' various interests, a

predominant amount of such work leaves out the fact that furry is dimensional, that its preceding traces exceed the community, and that notions of liberal inclusion often leave out the reality of anti-Blackness and xenophobia within its spaces. Rather than see these concerns as failures on the community, I argue that because of the way our wider socioeconomic and cultural community upholds easy-to-determine representations and documents, we fail to acknowledge the potency of literature in accessing archived moments and histories.

Building from this foundation, my project brings up several works that document the turn into the twenty-first century and the continuation of cultural injustices such as anti-Black racism and its structures. As documents, literary texts including Steve Domanski's *Circles*, K.C. Alpinus's "No Dogs," and Lloyd Yaeger's "Year Forty-Four" operate as "patterns of expression and reception discernible amid a jumble of discourse," as Gitelman argues in *Paper Knowledge*, and document subjects' lived desires in moments of saturated timeliness ("Introduction" 3). In performing a close-reading of Alpinus's "No Dogs," for instance, I show how its inclusion in editor Mary E. Lowd's *Roar: Volume 9* at the thematic question of resistance implicates furry as continuing to struggle with differences and inclusion into the 2020s. My paper closes that rather than uphold literature and furry fiction as objects of truth, fans and critics instead look to them as a crucially important part of furry and the question of fans' histories and growing archives.

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Furry History As Media Literacy

Chipper Wolf, 'Fang, Feather, and Fin'

Earlier this year, I took an academic risk that *didn't* pay off: I presented a paper on furry at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in Philadelphia. By furry standards, my paper's argument was fairly conservative: a theory about how the persistent association of furry with "cringe" reflects more about cultural norms than about our fandom. Yet rather than take up the argument, the other working group panelists and audience members raised up the sorts of objections I was trying to call out as reactionary and uninformed. "Can you convince me that this fandom is *actually* queer?" "What makes fursuiting different from blackface, but with regard to animals?" "Can you disabuse me of the notion that these [furries] are just adults who want to be kids?" While my paper certainly needed revisions (it was a working group,

after all), I was shocked that liberal-minded, intelligent academics would hazard speculative critiques rather than listen and engage the argument – or at least do some research before judging.

Yet what academics lack that many furries *have* is a kind of media literacy that attends to the challenges of incomplete knowledge and constant misinformation. Furrries, as I have written in my work on furry history, are “e-tinerant” – masters of moving from one online medium to another and adapting to ever more rapidly changing times. In this talk, I will focus specifically on furry history as a kind of media literacy. From print publications to MUDs and MUCKs, Second Life to social media, furry history is an archive not just of evolving fan interests in anthropomorphic animals, but also of adaptability. As a co- founder, along with Tofte Alpaca and Gale Frostbane, of *Fang, Feather, and Fin: a Furry History Blog and Archive*, I will speak on the challenges and rewards of doing furry history, as well as on how this history shows furries continually adapting to the changing media-sphere.