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## My Life As a Furry



Men in rabbit suits and girls in tails and whiskers: cute and cuddly, or sexually perverse? The world of fur fandom is rich in nuance and contradiction. Not surprisingly, the media always seem to get it wrong.

by L. J. Williamson

Todd says he first realized he was a Furry when he saw Walt Disney's "Robin Hood," an animated movie in which Robin Hood and Maid Marian are foxes, Little John is a bear and King Richard and Prince John are lions.

"I was just a kid, but something about that movie hit me like no other movie ever did," says Todd, who prefers not to use his last name. "I just thought it was the greatest thing. I was kind of obsessed with it, actually."

A thickly-built waiter with a pleasantly boyish face, Todd is a self-described "Furry" who spends his free time exploring his passion for anthropomorphic cartoon animals, and attends Furry conventions to meet others who share his passion.

With all the fan-based websites out there, it's easy to take stock of the numerous topics one can obsess over: teenybopper music, indie films, Star Trek, collectible license plates, Japanese anime — the list goes on and on. But one little-known kind of fanatic obsesses over all things Furry.

The most common response to the question "Have you ever heard of Furries?" is "Aren't those the people who like to have sex wearing animal suits?" That's because mainstream media outlets have recently hyped Furries as insatiably kinky animal fetishists. Vanity Fair's "Pleasures of the Fur" article breathlessly reported on stuffed-animal humping at a Midwestern Furry convention; MTV's "Sex2K" show aired a story on fur suit sex; and sex researcher Katharine Gates includes a section on Furries in her book "Deviant Desires: Incredibly Strange Sex."

All make it appear that Furrydom is possibly ersatz bestiality, the latest fetish to surface in the Internet age. One thing's for sure, anyone who would want to get it on with a pep rally mascot has to be a crazy, wild sex freak, right?

Right about the mascot thing maybe, but wrong about Furries as a whole. In truth, the Furry scene is nowhere near as sexy as the media have made it out to be. Furries are strange, sad, eccentric, malcontented and geeky, but sexy? No. It's much more complicated than that.

"Ask 10 different Furries what Furry is all about and you'll get 12 different answers," explains one Furry fan, "but the common thread is anthropomorphics."

Furries enjoy entertainment and art featuring animal creatures endowed with human traits (like Bugs Bunny). But this common thread immediately frays into several diverse sub-strings. There's Furry fiction fans, Furry art enthusiasts, Fursuiters, Spiritual Furs, Furry rave kids, Plushies, and "Furverts."

Furries spend a great deal of time inhabiting computer-created fantasy worlds. Some of these worlds provide sex, others don't. But G-rated Furries clearly distance themselves from those that enjoy a Furry jerk-off, especially when discussing the recent media interest. This still leaves the question of what would make someone cross the line from, say, a Disney movie fan, to a self-identified "Furry" who attends conventions. Furs howl that the press leaves the false impression that Furries go to conventions to find sex, when in fact, they go there to find acceptance.

"I spent high school running away from jocks who wanted to beat me up. Then I found Furry and I finally found someplace where I belonged. I found other people who realized how much human beings suck," says "Wolfstar," echoing a typical Furry sentiment.

"Our society makes you deny your animal nature," says Todd. He explains that he has no interest in people wearing fur suits, or in putting one on himself. "I own a tail, but I don't even wear it anymore," he says. Rather, he speaks of Furry as a way to connect to his innate animal qualities.

When asked if he has any interest in Furry sex pictures, Todd says, "It's erotic and everything, " but it's not what he attends conventions for. Yet Todd acknowledges that for some people he knows, interest in things Furry is "a true fetish. If the sex doesn't involve fur or animal play, they're not interested."

He also describes the G-rated Furries who distance themselves from the hornier aspects of the fur world. It's, in a way, reminiscent of Straightedge Punks' reactionary stance against drinking and drugs.

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TessaCat, a young, slender blonde who likes to wear ears, a leotard and cat makeup to conventions, explains that she's been dressing like a cat at parties since age 17. A shy teenager, she says she found that "You can be another person when you're in a cat suit, and then change back into your regular clothes and not take any responsibility for your actions."

Tessa says she would go to parties in her leotard, get lots of attention, flirt with every guy there, and not have to worry about taking on the high school label of "slut." When she took the suit off, she could slip back into her shy persona.

But a Furry convention isn't all girls in cat suits. Anyone expecting to find a group of particularly imaginative hedonists would feel misled upon walking in the doors at any of the several conventions held around the country. The most striking thing one notices, aside from dozens of people in full amusement park-style fur suits or simple ears and tails, is the disproportionate number of people who are, shall we say, of a modest level of attractiveness. Okay, downright homely.

A sense of disconnect from their human bodies is something many Furries seemed to have in common, which isn't surprising. Why wouldn't an un-charismatic or obese techie who spent most of his social life as an invisible character in a chat room or net game feel that his body was misplaced or irrelevant? That he'd be better off as a sleek panther or a loveable otter? And why not dry hump someone wearing an expressionless cartoon head instead of a real human, who might dole out more of the rejection that had led him to retreat to the vibrant life of an imaginary world? Furries, like all of us, want to be beautiful. And despite many Furries' insistence that they don't choose their animal spirits, that the animals choose them, rarely is anyone's totem or "Personal Furry" anything that humans regard as unattractive. Foxes, wolves, cats and tigers greatly outnumber weasels, sloths, and baboons.

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But back to the Furry sex issue.

Guess which group of Furies MTV, Vanity Fair, Loaded Magazine and other media outlets tend to focus on when exploring the world of Furry? And the Furies — at least the ones who aren't in it for the spoooge — just hate that. Many Furies in fact take pains to distance themselves from the sexual aspects of the fandom.

The tension between these opposing camps — the Furverts and the “Clean Furs” — presents an interesting dichotomy. Many Furies describe their endeavor as “a way to get in touch with your animal nature,” but quickly add that they want nothing to do with animalistic sex. Yet when are humans most closely intersecting with our animal brethren than when eating, fighting, or fucking?

MTV's Furry interviewee asserted, “Anyone who says that Furry is not a sexual-based fandom is really kind of fooling themselves,” while many other Furs' hackles are raised by the implication that Furry is little more than fetish. Yet interestingly, this difference of opinion manifests itself not as animosity between clean and dirty Furies, but between Furies and the media. As a whole, Furies' extremely tolerant, live-and-let live attitudes are rivaled only by their nearly universal scorn of the media. Furry convention producers often have extremely restrictive media policies, in one case insisting that a “director of media relations” or his representative will escort media during the entire course of their stay at the convention.

Although it's hard to describe a fandom whose own members don't totally agree on what is and isn't “Furry,” the media have earned the Furies' mistrust by getting a lot wrong. Vanity Fair's article “Pleasures of the Fur” contained a lengthy digression into “crush freaks,” people who enjoy seeing women step on bugs and worms; MTV's “Sex2K” focused on a Furry coming out to his mom about Fursuit sex; British magazine Loaded's article contained a lengthy interview with two zoophiles who discussed their sexual relationships with dogs. None of these are representative of Furry fandom, and they're not even accurate representations of Furry fetish. There's enough kink in the Furry world that filling in blanks with separate perversions is unnecessary.

The assumption is that nothing but sex could make Furies as passionate as they are about their culture. Yet media coverage of other nerd subcultures like Trekkies hasn't been nearly as sex-centric, despite the existence of sexy aspects of Trekkie fandom such as erotic fan fiction.

The sexual side of Fur, however, is no media fabrication. Visit the vendor room at any Furry convention and you'll see binder after binder of really nasty Furry art. Search the Internet for Furry art and you'll notice that the sites that are G-rated very explicitly say so. Those that aren't may feature sketches of humanoid cats being tit-tortured with mousetraps, zebras with mammoth cocks being sucked off by lions, orgies of lesbian wolves, and foxes lasciviously fingering themselves for eager packs of on-looking dogs. Fursuit sex and plush toy love also have vocal enthusiasts. The fabrication, however, lies in the implication that Furies are sexual superfreaks. In reality, they're just disenfranchised nerds.

Clean Furies are used to co-existing with their “yiffy” (Furspeak for “sexed-up”) counterparts, but outsiders might be put off by some of the more outré convention attendees. On condition of anonymity, the author of a G-rated a comic book featuring an animal character described his experience at a Furry convention he was invited to attend, and how revolted he was by the horny Furs he encountered. “They have convinced themselves that all writers and artists who have ever placed a talking animal in a story must in fact be closet

Furries at best, and that surely those creators would not be disturbed by the sexuality of Furry fandom,” he says. “This includes even the classics like Bugs Bunny, the Pink Panther, and Mickey Mouse. They can’t wait to talk to you honestly about the nastiest, most bizarre aspects of their make-believe creatures.”

It’s true that Furries, who are accustomed to feeling like an oppressed minority in the culture at large, may tend to go overboard when they get to a convention where they can finally be honest about their obsessions and engage in some long-missed face-to-face interaction, as opposed to the Internet chat room and gaming environment. And there’s no denying that too much time spent in imaginary Internet lands (known as Furry MUCKS) can further damage an already underdeveloped personality.

Furries themselves will often cheerfully admit their deficiencies. “Cat,” an electrical engineer with tiger-stripe tattoos on his face and silicon implants in his cheeks, upper lip and forehead, said bluntly in a discussion of Furry spirituality, that “Furries as a rule are a pretty fucked-up group of people.”

“It’s rough if you’re a transsexual – it’s even rougher if you try to explain that you’re a cat in a human body,” says another Furry fan, who bemoaned the fact that Furries can’t opt to surgically change their species in the way transsexuals can change their gender.

These conversations are typical of what one will find at Furry conventions, scheduled alongside social events like dances and talent shows. Scattered here and there in private hotel rooms, one might also find places like “The Nursery” — where adult babies can get diapered — and Fursuit dry-humping orgies, or Plushie parties, where people who disdain or can’t find human sexual partners stick their organs into an SPH (strategically placed hole) torn into a carnival prize raccoon. But most of the Furries who get laid at the convention will probably hook up through mutual interests, physical attraction, flirtatious conversation, and a few drinks, just like everybody else does. Maybe there’ll be a little extra biting and scratching thrown in, but nothing crazy.

The average furry is a lot like the average Trekkie: he just likes his fictional humans crossed with animals instead of Vulcans. Furry is simply a camaraderie based on mutual interests. Just as Dungeons and Dragons gamers love orcs and trolls, Pagans love faeries and nymphs, or as alterna-nerds love every band on Sub-Pop, Furries love their fox- and tiger-men. And when a glossy magazine reports that Furry is only about perversion, it misses the target in the same way that stories about things like raves and Burning Man typically do.

“I (attend conventions) to see people who I don’t get to see for a whole year, but whom I consider good friends,” says Todd. “We keep in touch over the Internet, and we just feel connected through our Furriness. So to get to spend a whole weekend where I’m actually with them feels great.”

Get in touch with your inner furry at the ConFurence convention, CF2003, which will be held at the Hilton Burbank Airport and Convention Center April 25-27, 2003. For more info, visit <http://www.polarden.org/cf2003/>. More info on Furry can be found at <http://www.furry.com>.