# Furries Make The Internet Go: Consumer Culture In Fandom

by

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**INTRODUCTION.**

Growing up on the fandom side of the internet, it has always been impossible to explore different virtual spaces for your community without coming across content created for other communities and subsequently learning about them through osmosis. Sites like DeviantArt, Livejournal, and Tumblr facilitated spaces where various fandoms could carve out their digital niches for them to generate and circulate content to their hearts' desires. But no matter how entrenched one could be in their particular community – whether it be anime, comic books, TV shows, books – there was no way of not being aware of the communities with whom you shared your space. One such community that has, from my observations growing up, seeped into every single fandom I've been a part of is the furry fandom.

The first image one thinks of when envisioning the furry fandom are the elaborate, technicolor costumes of vaguely canine creatures. Fursuits are an integral part of the furry experience, both for those within the community and those outside its gates that have even the vaguest impression of the community. As an object, they represent not only the person inside the suit, but the trends and trials that people in the subculture are willing to take on to wear them. Those who wear the suit – known formally as *fursuiters* - are not the only ones that are involved in this facet of the culture – the suits have to be designed, created, and sometimes even sold in order to be worn, which involves multiple parties of varying talents. People who design suits don't necessarily wear them, and people who wear suits don't necessarily make them. Each suit is borne out of a flow of business that runs through the furry subculture and its artists, costume designers, and sellers - any of which could overlap with each other. I wanted to dissect the processes that each hand goes through in producing a suit, what had to be done in order for designs to come into fruition, and why they even need to exist.

*A fursuiter striking a pose at KatsuCon 2019. Photo by me.*

What gratification is gained from participating in the suit's production? What are people willing to pay to embody these designs, and is it worth the price? How does the social status of the fursuiter come into play in terms of accessibility to these means of obtaining fursuits? What designs become popular, and does that popularity hinder the uniqueness wearers strive to accomplish with their personalized designs? Who decides what becomes popular: artists who draw the designs, sellers that build the designs into a wearable form, the fursuiters themselves that become big names in the subculture? All these questions come together into the focal point that I aimed to explore: how is the business of fursuits conducted? Fandoms as we know them today were born out of DIY content, generating various forms of work based off texts or aesthetics, and eventually developing businesses from the consumption of and capitalization off this content. The furry fandom is no exception to this, but the fursuit bears so much significance as a bridge between the virtual identity of the person and the physical plane where the person exists that the process behind its creation can be as unique as the character it embodies.

## WHAT ARE FURRIES?

Furries are defined as "an enthusiast for animal characters with human characteristics", and this enthusiasm can manifest through art, costuming, fanfiction, or merely a general appreciation of it all.

According to fandom historian Fred Patten, furries were first conceptualized as a concept at a 1980 science fiction convention, when people gathered to discuss the place of anthropomorphic characters in sci-fi through the lens of Steve Gallacci's comic *Albedo Anthropomorphics*. The discussion group that would begin to regularly meet at science fiction conventions and comics conventions would then expand into other forms of keeping the community. In fanzines dating back as early as 1983, "furry fandom" had been circulating as a coined term for these fans. By the mid-1990s, it had become a household name within the convention scenes. Nowadays, it has grown from group discussions and fanzines to whole websites and conventions dedicated to the community.

Other citations for inspiration of the subculture stem from media centering around anthropomorphic animals that predate Gallacci's work. Osamu Tezuka's manga-turned-anime *Kimba The White Lion* (1966), Walt Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973), Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down* (1972), and Robert Crumb's 1965 adult comic *Fritz the Cat* all feature varying degrees of anthropomorphic animals in various genres of media that would build the tenets of furry culture still seen today.

From ancient carvings of animal-headed deities, to 12th century Japanese scrolls of dancing frogs and rabbits, to nightmarish paintings of upright animals to represent the downfall of morality, to children's books - anthropomorphic animals has been a staple in human artistic expression. It pushes the boundaries of who or what can be human, who or what can we relate to, no matter what form they take.

But not all furry art is created equal. It's not all cute woodland animals standing on their back legs and wearing coats, nor is it all colorful toon wolves with scene hair and opposable thumbs. Strike observes the types of anthropomorphic art in Chapter 5 of his book *Furry Nation: The True Story Of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture*, and proposes what he calls a "Morph-O-Meter" to gauge just how human (or inhuman) sentient animals can look. I'm going to call it the furry spectrum. It's not a new idea, it's been meme'd on social media platforms across the globe by artists. The spectrum is as vast and diverse as artists find new ways to anthropomorphize animals.

*Example of a "nekomimi". Art by me.*

There are four types Strike names. The first is *Nekomimi*, derived from the Japanese words for cat (*neko*) and ear (*mimi*). It's a popular trope in anime and manga, where people (often girls) are essentially human save for a pair of cat ears and a cat tail on their bodies. These features may either be accessories that are removable, or they may be real functioning biological parts of their body. The adoption of cat-like traits such as agility, licking to groom, and purring are usually a part of it too. Of course, cats aren't the only animals to be anthropomorphized in this way. Dogs and rabbits are common examples as well.


*Example of "animal-headed" anthro. Art by me.*

The second is "animal-headed people", which can range from what we see in *Bojack Horseman* to the form fursuits commonly take after, with a more "upright

animal/human hybrid" silhouette rather than a "person wearing a horse mask" one. So long as they walk like a human, talk like a human, wear clothes like a human, but have the face of an animal, it falls under this category.

*Example of "semi-realistic" anthro While Pinkie Pie of My Little Pony is not an accurate depiction of a pony, she is built and moves around as a one for most of the time, with the occasional humanistic traits like standing upright or clapping with her front hooves. Art by me.*

The third is what Strike calls "semi-realistic", though I personally believe this overlaps with the final category a lot. He describes semi-realistic as "based on actual animal anatomy but represented in a stylized manner", so quite literally, quadrupeds on their hind legs. The classic children's book series *Frog & Toad* would also fall under this category. Usually, if they look like they can switch between being in their natural animal position to walking like a person, it's semi-realistic.

The last example is "feral", where the anatomy and mannerisms of the character are completely like that of their real-life counterparts, with the exception of more expressive faces to convey emotion that the viewer can process and the ability to speak. Strike claims that the most distinct feature of this category is that they're accurate enough to be "mistaken for the real thing", if not for their sentience.

*Example of "feral" anthro. A majority of the characters from The Lion King move around and behave as their real life counterparts, with their anatomy near-perfect to real lions. Credit to Disney.*

These anthropomorphic forms comprise the text around which the furry fandom circulates, but the engagement with the medium doesn't stop there. Fans do not just consume, they insert and embody themselves into the culture through what is known as a "fursona." The work that goes into the creation of a fursona, the fictionalized identity one creates for themself when they become part of the fandom, can be as minimal or as extensive as one chooses. From drawing a design to choosing a name, from creating a backstory for the fursona to constructing a fursuit of it, the fursona is an integral part of the furry experience. The identity can then be assumed either in virtual spaces (such as Second Life or art sites like Furaffinity) or in the physical realm. The fursona needn't align with the human identity in any way at all, in terms of sex, gender or sexuality. It is an original avatar in a social setting that is representative of the wearer and what they choose to signify them. Dogs and wolves are the most popular choices for fursonas, but the landscape of fursonas is expansive and not bound by real species either: hybrid animals such as "folves" (foxes & wolves) and even Pokémon are common. The fursona type can also take any of the forms on the furry spectrum I had delineated before. While animal-headed people and semi-realistic fursonas are the most common, it is animal-headed people that undeniably saturate most of the fursuit subcommunity, due to it being the easiest design for humans to wear.

## THE FURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The adage "money can't buy happiness" becomes harder to believe the older you get. Things become more expensive as time goes on, it seems. Dinner with friends becomes a question of whether to spend $30 on a night out or on groceries this week. Clothes become less about quality and more about quantity – as in, how much can you get for the slim budget you

have? Hobbies impact our wallet as well, no matter how much we want to think that we can always fall back to them to decompress from the post-capitalist whirlpool we're in. Musicians need instruments, artists need supplies, gamers need games, readers need books, and so on and so forth. There can always be ways around paying for certain things, of course. But at the end of the day, if you have a passion, you will need to shell some bucks out for it at some point.

Now expand from "hobbies" to "fandoms". See that the logic is still the same. Every fan enjoys their media of choice to different degrees, but the haven of fantastical community is just as mired by the concept of "who can afford what" as anything else. Merchandise, conventions, commissions, cosplays, etc – these things cost money. And if you don't have money, you can't partake in these things, and if you can't partake in these things, your passion and credibility as a fan can be questioned.

For furries, their fandom operates somewhat differently. It is simultaneously extremely personal and very communal. There is no one text they all come around to share, like a comic or TV show. They are the text, with their fursonas and how they take inspiration from existing texts to add to their own body of original work. It is a fandom that, after much studying on my part, relies heavily on the individual to create content for themselves to promote to others. Don't draw? Can't make a suit? Commission someone who can to do it for you.

It seems simple enough, until you put into perspective the ramifications of this unspoken hierarchy built around monetary access. You can consume furry content to your heart's desire, but if you really want to cement yourself in the space as your own individual text to be shared, and you don't create content, how much are you willing to spend? If you're not an asshole who steals art, it can cost hundreds of dollars to commission artists to draw icons, reference sheets, banners, etc, to create a fursona for you and cultivate your online presence. Fursuits, which are

arguably the pinnacle of the furry experience, cost thousands of dollars and take months to make. It's the final frontier of the furry journey – to embody your fursona, your design, in the physical space and be consumed. Of course, not all furries want to partake in suiting, but those who do face major financial hurdles. This all becomes the cost of happiness. What happens when you have all the design prowess and ideas in the world, but no money to bring it to fruition through the most accepted avenues of your passion? Do you fall to the wayside in the fandom circles, does your hobby forcibly take the back burner?

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To study the significance of fursuits in the furry fandom, look at the bigger picture in terms of what the fursuit falls under (a form of cosplay) and what fandoms typically operate on (the consumption and recontextualization of text).

In his book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins references what British feminists refer to as "consumer girl culture" – the culture of young girls that take to the shopping mall as their own space, because it is a hub where they can buy paraphernalia of their various interests to weave into their own spaces either at home, on their personal items, on themselves, etc (40). The example fandom Jenkins uses to better illustrate this are girls that are into performers they see on MTV. It's not just one performer they follow and adore, but the way they usually follow various performers and own a diverse collection of paraphernalia of different performers that makes them become "part of the fandom" (in which the fandom is bands, or "bandom").

This "consumer girl culture", the buying of merchandise to create a tangible and visible identity comprised of various components, can easily be applied to the furry fandom as well. As stated before, the furry fandom has no singular text of which it is completely derived from. Some

may compare it to the sci-fi fandom or the anime fandom, both of which are genres and not singular texts themselves. You may say, then, that "furry" is a genre, whether it means to be or not. Media like Blacksad, Star Fox, and My Little Pony are all perfect examples of "furry" media. There are fandoms that revolve solely around those pieces of media that don't participate in the more general furry culture. It doesn't necessarily need to be made by furries for furries to co-opt them: it just has to have well-designed, sentient, talking animals. Jenkins quotes Hebdidge's conclusion that "appropriated symbols" (in this case, media that isn't necessarily targeting the furry fandom) are pulled out of their contexts to be given meaning through the logic of their use (40).

Fans "knit together" their various interests across textual boundaries, often referring to another piece of media when talking about one piece of media. The furry fandom revolves around that, but then takes it one step further by internalizing those medias to not just build a knowledgeable repertoire of popular media consumption, but to create the identity that will immerse them into this greater fandom narrative. Of course, this is where buying comes in. Not the buying of paraphernalia to "prove" their knowledge of furry cornerstones, but the buying of representations of their fursona to validate their place as "one of them", as a furry with an online presence. Whether it be in the form of wearable cat ears, commissioned art of their fursona by a furry artist, or a fully-built fursuit, there is always a level of consumption that goes into validating the specific design the fan fleshed out for themselves. Marla Carlson in her piece "Furry Cartography: Performing Species" – in which she studies furries in their natural habitats (conventions, meetups, etc) - describes a furry artist's first-time experience at a convention as "hellish" because of the amount of business she ended up garnering from fellow furries wanting portraits done. She also mentions one of her informants and how much they spent not only on

buying their suit, but maintaining it over the years (naturally, upwards of thousands of dollars) (197). It's typical fan culture to almost "hoard" things because they come from the texts you are passionate about. It's not to say one can't be part of fandom if they don't own merchandise or cosplays, but there will always be that inner need to consume more, to bring the passion outside of the text and into the tangible space. Sara Ahmed in the chapter "Happy Objects" of her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, talks about how our idea of happiness is intrinsically tied to our consumerist society – we need the nuclear household to be happy, we need these things because they make us happy, as if we do not imbue the sense of happiness into the things we buy but that the thing itself is the happy object. Person-object relations and the imbuement of sentimentality in stuff is a cornerstone in fan culture that thrives on consumption and recontextualization. A phone charm suddenly becomes special because it's the same phone charm an anime character from a popular series has. A jacket can be painted on and redesigned to resemble a character's outfit and be used for cosplay. Toys marketed to kids become collectibles for adults. If there is a means, fans will buy. For furries, buying might be the only way to make themselves known in the fandom if they are not creators as well. Fursuiting is not the end-all for the furry experience by any means, but it is an extremely unique form of wearing the reinvented self that many furries wish to be able to do if they could afford it. Until then, their embodiment remains in the digital space.

## **THE WORLD WIDE WEB.**

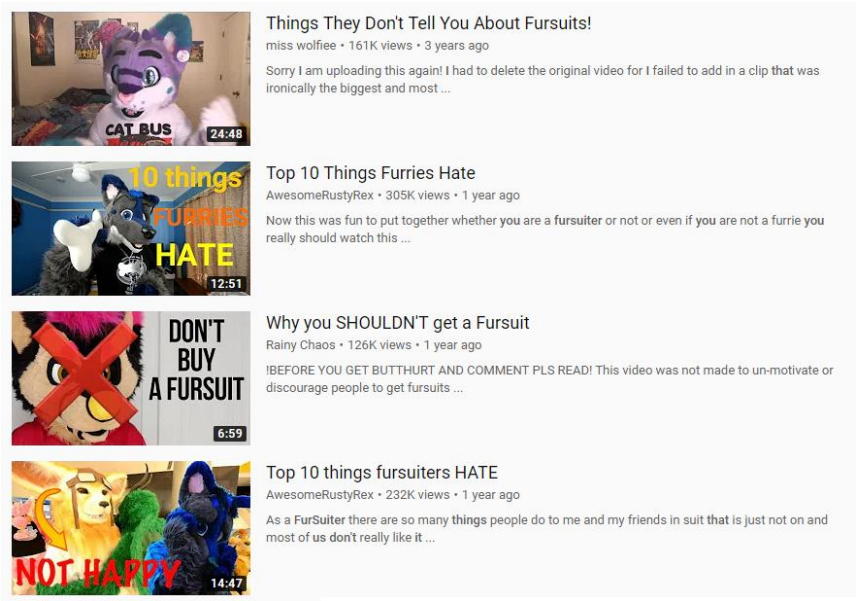
To better contextualize the origins of fursuits and the culture of furries in general, I've explored their internet niches where a majority of the creative process is found and where you can encounter various creatives in total immediacy. While furries are best known in the

mainstream media for their physical presence, the community thrives the most online. Furaffinity.net is, in one of my informant's words, "the biggest furry art community site", a hub of art and entrepreneurship, where people can advertise themselves on their profiles as freelancers in art or indie fursuit creators. Twitter, Tumblr, Deviantart, and Instagram all contain furry "sides" to them that could be used as advertising space as well. It is not uncommon for one person to have a profile in multiple sites for them to reach to as wide of an audience as possible, given the online furry diaspora being as vast as it is. WikiFur, a parody of Wikipedia, is a database on most major cultural landmarks, notable people, and various controversies within the subculture. In their words, it's "a free encyclopedia written by and for the furry community". While it is not professionally maintained (numerous articles I came across had links to dead sites or haven't been updated for years), it is still a very useful starting point to get a quick overview on the who's who of the community from the perspective of those within it. As for sites that focused primarily on fursuits themselves, I was able to find sites such as Fursuitsupplies.com, Autumnfallings.com, Fluffymischief.com, and more. The first site offers not only premade suits, but the materials needed to make these suits, while the second and third sites operate through commissions to have unique designs made by them. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to come in contact with anyone from any of the major sites, but my informants were able to give me insight on what companies are most popular throughout the furry community, as well as freelance creators on social media that promote themselves and their works on platforms such as Instagram.

I won't lie, doing a majority of my fieldwork online feels like a copout. I'm on the internet for most of my free time already, how is this "getting out of my comfort zone", living up to the mantra of making the strange familiar and vice versa? I guess that's what happens when

the focus of your majors inadvertently becomes fandom subcultures. Nowadays, the internet's where all of it happens, and physical events like conventions feel almost like a simulation of the hectic, overwhelming deluge of medias that people encounter on their timelines, on their dashboards, in their chatrooms, et cetera. The furry fandom is one such subculture, with its presence known across multiple platforms. Furry-centric websites aside, social media like Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook with image-heavy interfaces are used to their fullest potential.

YouTube, to my surprise, has a fairly prolific furry sector. Independent vloggers in their fursuits, tutorials, convention montages, speedpaints, the list goes on. The vloggers I primarily look for are ones that offer insight into the world of creating fursuits.




*YouTube search results for "fursuit".*

Videos with titles like "Fursuit Making 101 – Basic Suit Making Materials", "Fursuit Building – Types of Foam", and "Things They Don't Tell You About Fursuits!" offer all the answers one could ever have on the subject. Much like convention panels that discuss zines and art materials, these videos focus more on information needed by fan content creators than by consumers of the content (Jenkins 48).

One YouTuber by the moniker of miss wolfiee, whose video "Things They Don't Tell You About Fursuits!" is performed entirely while she is in her fursuit, goes into detail about the misconceptions of fursuit culture, as well as general warnings before getting into the practice.

"Much like getting a tattoo, you really really want to look at your character and say, 'Am I willing to spend hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars on making a suit for this character?'" she teaches the viewers. "Your fursuit price really never ends, in a sense – yes, you may have paid off your suit, but you're going to be spending a lot more money on cleaning it, events, updates, maintenance, and repairs."

The general consensus amongst fursuiters on YouTube can be easily summed up in one sentence uttered by miss wolfiee: "You do not have to have a fursuit to be a furry!", followed up by how much it costs not only to buy a suit, but to own one. It's not meant in any discouraging way, from the videos from fursuiters that are teaching fledging fursuiters how to maneuver through this market. It's just a hard truth.

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While most furry vloggers like to address their viewers with direct speech and scripts, some vloggers prefer a more hands-on, show-don't-tell approach to sharing their process.

*A screenshot of StarryKitsune's foam base timelapse.*

"Tia Fursuit Foam Base Timelapse" is a video that runs at three minutes and 27 seconds long. StarryKitsune, the channel the video is from, has 2.6 thousand subscribers, and

the video itself has 154 thousand views, with the most recent comment being from two days ago. It's pretty easy to fall down the rabbit hole of mindlessly watching YouTube videos without thinking too hard about the people behind them, but in this case, I try to pay extra attention. When I watched this, I felt more like I'm in a seminar than in the comfort of my bed, comforter pulled all the way up to my chin with my iPad propped up on my chest.

The video takes place in what looks like StarryKitsune's house. Her foam pieces, carved in varying degrees of completion, lay haphazardly scattered around the brightly lit beige room, with a completed fursuit head in the top left corner. StarryKitsune has an iPad of her own, which is propped up on her workbench to show a reference sheet of the character that is to be made into a suit. A brown deer named "Tia", which explains the title.

Being only three minutes long, the video is sped up and completely silent. I watch StarryKitsune take blocks of white foam and a little power saw (the handheld kind – I don't know if there's a name for them). One block is larger than the others, with a sketch of a cartoony deer head penciled in on all sides. She takes her power saw and begins to carve, bringing out a muzzle from the uncharacteristic Styrofoam. We only see her face once, at the beginning of the video. On the block that would become the head, she leans her own head on its flat top to look directly at the camera. It's a split second, given the speed at which the recording is going. But even so, her glance reminds me that I'm watching her, and that she knows she's being watched. I'm reminded of how intimate the setting is, and suddenly I feel like I'm invading her space.

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Going outside of the DIY fursuit scene, one will find pages upon pages of online stores that sell fursuits made by professional costume designers or passionate furries that have joined

companies in order to lend their talents. Jenkins mentions “semiprofessional companies […] emerging to assist in the production and distribution of fan goods” when talking about the sci-fi fandom’s art community, and it’s no different with furries (48). On sites like morefurless.com, all prices vary based on complexity of the design given, with a frame of reference being necessary but giving the option for artistic liberty to be taken by the costume designers. Certain sites will provide perks like moving parts or wings to the suits, but some sites like kilcodocostumes.com do not. It’s because every fursuit is a handcrafted piece of art, unable to be mass-manufactured. Because of the uniqueness of fursona designs, fursuits are often created through commission, with people taking spots in queues and waiting months to a year for their suit to be specially made for them. To accommodate unique designs, you need people with the experience to pull it off.

Lemonbratfursuits.com, a very cute site with a very cute logo and a very cute background of very cute cat heads. It’s not uncommon for fursuit sites to have a degree of whimsy to them, from the descriptions to the layout. The hobby itself revolves around whimsy, after all.


*The welcome banner on Lemonbratfursuits.com.*

“We make high quality custom fursuits,” they brag on their front page. “Our style is mega-cute, and toony. We love any project with unique features and color combinations!” From the rectangular slideshow on their front page that showcases their suits being happily worn and artfully photographed, I can see their art style in every single customer. They have a

gallery page with more examples of their completed works While the designs, patterns, colors, and species are all different, I can see the distinct style in every single suit – bulbous nose and paws, big expressive eyes, the mouth partially open and curled upward for a perpetual smile, less Disney and more Don Bluth. Lemonbratsuits.com requires every customer to provide a reference sheet of their fursona (the animal character a person designs to represent themselves), whether they draw it themselves or commission an artist to do it for them. From there, Lemonbratsuits takes two to three months to craft the suit with the utmost accuracy and best choices in fur and fabric, and it shows. Every single suit I see in their gallery beautifully unique, with designs ranging vastly in complexity. Some are your standard blue or pink wolf, some are raccoon-bat-dog hybrids with piles of fur running down the back and to the floor in a fluffy tail, the color scheme skillfully chosen to create the sense of a forest cryptid one might see in a children's book. There is personality in every design, even the simple ones. For a split second, I find myself wondering how my art would translate into a wearable object. How a design I could make would be brought to life with the right choices in fur and fabric.

It's starting to become a little tempting, not going to lie. But then Lemonbratsuits snaps me out of the curious fantasy with their price guide. "Starting price is $1,500 for a partial suit that's just the head and paws! Full suits start at $2,500! All of our fursuiters have decades of experience, so the price is worth it!"

Can't argue with that, but ouch.

**PERFORMING (AND CONSUMING) SPECIES.**

It's always fascinating to see someone put on their fursuit. In their human form, they maneuver themselves like anyone else would. They walk like a person, talk like a person, the movements – no matter how animated or blasé they may be – all are common human tics, like nodding to a question or shrugging with their hands in their pockets. But once the suit comes on, and the human form is hidden, their movements take in a much more exaggerated form, with motions that one wouldn't normally do outside the suit. A singular nod becomes an excited dog-like head-bobbing (also because subtle movements are harder to capture while wearing a giant wolf head). Head tilts or excitable wiggling to further convey the tone of conversation are common as well. And the hands – they move everywhere, from waving to doing the Cat Paw Thing ("you know, like nya"), to scratching the top of their head while in thought. You've seen these mannerisms with mascots. Costumed Disney characters at Disney World do this all the time. You know there's someone inside (and you pity them for having to maneuver in a sweltering, claustrophobic space no matter how much they seem to enjoy it), but the costume takes them elsewhere. In "Posthuman Drag: Understanding Cosplay as Social Networking in a Material Culture", Jason Bainbridge and Craig Norris explain cosplay as such: "prefiguring the liminal spaces offered by new media's online identities and digital avatars with the cosplayer capable of transcending cultural, racial and gender boundaries and stereotypes." Fursuits, which are entirely about transcending the form we are most used to, as humans, applies to this as well. Within the fursuit is the same person you saw before, but almost like an alternate version of them where they live inside a cartoon and functions like these are the conversational norm. And what do you do when you're not in the suit talking to someone who is? Do you mimic their mannerisms to match the flow of conversation? No matter how comfortable you are with the

person in the suit, all that foam and fur serves almost as a window through which you see a spectacle behind the glass.

Ahmed says that “happiness puts us into intimate contact with things”, but the objects themselves do not carry any innate powers of happiness – it is the bond between person and object, the expectation of them making us happy that ends up affecting how we react to them. Bainbridge and Norris posit that cosplay is about the “materiality” of the art in which “likes and desires are inscribed onto the body”, but require the presence of community for those likes and desires to be recognized. Happiness is indecisive and slippery – what others say can affect whether an object should make someone happy, and then it becomes a fight over tastes. The inadvertent reliance on established systems, established hierarchies, to tell us whether something or not should make us happy has hindered the sincerity of the experience itself. Happy objects do not just come to us anymore – we have to seek them out, we have to suffer for them, in order for that payoff to provide pleasure.

The phenomenon of fandom thrives on the collective affection of the source material and all that the source material has spawned, both in canon and from the fans. “Fandom does not preserve a radical separation between readers and writers,” says Jenkins. “Fans do not simply consume preproduced stories; they manufacture their own fanzine stories and novels, art prints, songs, videos, performances, etc” (46). There is creation, there is community, and while there certainly are hierarchies within the subculture, ultimately there is happiness circulating.

“Knowledge cultures never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture,” Jenkins writes in “Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers” (144). While he talks about the commodification of information found in texts and the subsequent interpretations passed between content creators and content consumers, his words can be expanded to cover the flow of business amongst furries.

Companies develop to accommodate the demand for suits, artists advertise themselves as freelancers to assuage those who cannot draw for themselves but have the funds to pay someone else. Jenkins' observation of fandom as participatory culture sums it up perfectly (135-136):

1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content;
2. a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and
3. economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.

"Objects become 'happiness means'," Ahmed explains. "Objects not only embody good feeling but are perceived as necessary for a good life" (34). In the furry community, a fursona cannot be fully recognized until it is given a visual manifestation – in this case, the art is the object. It is near impossible to navigate the community without some sort of visual marker to your image. Once the fursona is achieved through either creation of it yourself or by commissioning an artist, the yearning for a higher level of recognition could be developed. Being recognized as the fursona, being able to embody the fursona, in the physical space becomes a "next step" rather than an "optional step" for some. A common sentiment amongst many furries who fursuit are that they are "a totally different person" when in their suit – their personalities shift, they are friendlier, they are more willing to interact with people in a way that they never could while in their human garb.

**INTERVIEW 1: ROSE.**

Because of the notoriety the mainstream media has placed upon the furry fandom, most furries are wary about being researched or interviewed. This caution is most practiced at conventions, spaces sanctioned for furries to meet, but can carry over into one-on-one scenarios as well. Aware of this, I couldn't fault those who weren't interested in being interviewed by me for this project. I had a feeling I would get the best luck looking to friends I've known for a while as reliable informants. I was able to reconnect with a mutual friend from high school who has always been an open and active furry for years. Through her, I was given the contact of one of her friends who makes fursuits, both for her to wear and for others to buy. My third informant is an online friend who has been drawing furry art for over a decade, living off of commissions for her work.

My first informant, Rose, and I had gone to a convention in Maryland together one February, which was the last time I was able to see her in person. The both of us went to middle and high school together, members of the very small, disjointed fandom community in our schools. While we always had different friend groups, we acknowledged each other and held a mutual respect for the other's work and interests. We followed each other on DeviantArt, where we were much more sociable as fellow artists. It was always like that between us – the virtual spaces helped in overcoming whatever initial hesitations we experienced. Growing up online, it wasn't something we were unfamiliar with.

I had contacted Rose on Facebook early in the semester, knowing off the bat that if I were to talk to anyone about the furry fandom, I would talk to her. Even online, her personality was hard to miss. Upbeat, polite, and quick to reply, Rose was more than enthusiastic to tell me about the furry community from her eyes. We sporadically talked throughout the semester, following

*Rose in her Firewings partial suit.*

each other on Instagram to see what the other had been up to recently, occasionally reminiscing about old cons we had gone to together while discussing upcoming cons we hoped to attend. When I had finally gotten to sit down with her, so to speak, for a virtual interview, she didn't miss a beat.

"I hope you don't mind that some answers are gonna be long," she wrote to me in the middle of our interview, cutting herself off. "Some of this is more personal to me." I encouraged her to be as personal and as thorough as she wanted, and judging from the smiling emoticon she replied with, it was what she wanted to hear. Knowing Rose for as long as I had, I knew about her fursona for years, but had never gotten the chance or the initiative to look into it myself. I also knew that it was her fursona that she had as a fursuit, so it only made sense for me to start from square one.

Firewings, her fursona, is a red dragon with scars and a collar that started off as an imaginary friend when Rose was seven. Despite her intimidating description, she was "just like [Rose]" in that she shared the same hobbies as her creator, such as singing and eating. "I was always the kid that questioned if the Big Bad Wolf was really so bad," she had said, "and that was no different for dragons who swept away princesses. I had always liked to see them in a kinder or more heroic sense, and that had a huge effect on how Firewings took form." As she grew through various phases in her childhood, going from fandom to fandom and milestone to milestone in adolescence, she kept Firewings as almost a totem to ground her as she discovered her sexuality as a lesbian woman and came into herself. With the self-discoveries came changes

to Firewings' design, such as the scars and collar added during her tumultuous middle school years. "She's grown up with me, matured with me. Even as an adult, I can still feel her presence with me, like I would when I was a little kid."

Rose has used Firewings not only as an imaginary friend and a spiritual totem throughout her life, but also as an online avatar on multiple sites where she would spend a majority of her time. Though Firewings has been representative of her for more than a decade, only two years ago did she actualize her fursona in the physical manner by commissioning her Firewings fursuit from a company known as KC Costumes. However, unlike most fursuits I've seen, it is only a head, gloves, shoes, tail, and small wings. Known as a "partial suit", Rose had opted for this version of the suit because it was much cheaper than a fullbody, costing $450. Steep, yes, but fullbody suits can cost between $1,500 to $6,000, depending on how elaborate or accessorized they are intended to be. While it's possible to commission indie creators for suits, it's more common to commission from well-known companies in the furry community. Autumn Fallings, Phoenix Next, and Don't Hug Cacti are three of the top fursuit making companies in the fandom, getting nearly all their sales from online orders. K-Line is the fourth most popular company, based in Japan while the other three are based in America. While it's possible to buy premade suits of existing species (wolves and foxes being the most common species), furries can commission any type or hybrid of creature to be made so long as they provide references.

When I asked about trends in the furry community, Rose replied, "Design choices, it comes more in the form of species. Over the past two years, a made up species called Dutch Angel Dragons (made by a popular furry artist that went by ino98777) took the whole furry community by storm, and the fursuits are no exception." Trends don't just stay within one part of the fandom, but are realized in the different types of content created for the fandom. What

becomes popular amongst the artists bleeds into the fursuiters because of how symbiotic the two art forms are.

When it came to the physical experience of being in her suit, she tells me how hot and disorienting it is. “Fursuits are often disgustingly hot. A scientist decided to research how warm it got inside one of the fursuit heads, and stuck a heat sensor inside one. It averages to about 125 degrees Fahrenheit; only about 20 degrees cooler than a sauna. Another is the poor vision. Most fursuits have terrible sight and enormous blind spots, often leading to fursuiters needing to have a handler to guide them along.”

Then why bother suffering through it? Is the character really worth embodying when it can just be simulated online?

In her cheerful tone, still recognizable even through text, she answers, “When you're in a fursuit, while there is absolutely a line, you are able to get away with being far more outlandish and silly with other people. If I, out of costume, went up to you, pretended to take a big sniff of you, and pretended you smelled gross, I would look like an absolute mad woman. However, if a six foot tall husky with a big doofy grin on his face did it, it'd be hilarious! There's something in us as humans, weirdly, that finds it easier to trust a walking, talking animal, than another human being. It's strange and endearing at the same time.”

## **INTERVIEW 2: MARLOWE.**

When I asked Rose if she knew anyone that made their own suits, she directed me to her friend Marlowe. I could tell that there was a hesitation to talk to me from the way our conversations through Instagram direct messaging went. They were friendly but rather reserved

in their answers to my questions, resulting in a brief interview with information that I hope to follow up on the more we talk, if we have that opportunity. They were nothing like my two other informants who knew me as a friend and were eager enough to talk about their work. I still wanted to talk to them, because just from a quick glance at their Instagram profile I could tell that they were very prolific both as an artist and as a fursuit builder. When I asked about their fursuit, they told me that they had made it themselves, using foam and furs acquired from FursuitSupplies, costing them $250 in materials and three months of on-and-off work to build it. They make most of their business off of furry art with the occasional post about selling a suit to get rid of it popping up on their Instagram. When I asked about what the fursuit they made for themselves was like, they had sent me a design sheet they drew themselves.

*Marlowe wearing just the head of their suit.*

"My fursona is basically me!" they explain. "I have exaggerated some of my flaws for comedic effect, and accentuated virtues that I wish to emulate." The design of their fursona, a deer that also goes by Marlowe, closely resembles them in hairstyle and choice of accessories such as glasses and clothes – a far cry from Rose and her decisions for Firewings. "I wear my suit mainly at conventions and public 'furmeets'. Inside the suit, things seem to slow down a bit and I become more aware of myself."

They also joked about acting like a character for the "normies" that may run into them in public spaces outside of conventions, playing up the animalistic traits of their fursona. "I'm a lot looser in my suit around people at cons because they know what kind of person I am inside it."

**INTERVIEW 3: HARUMI.**

Harumi has been a longtime inspiration for me as a fanartist since my early high school days. We met by chance on Twitter two years ago, when I had found her account and followed her, and she had done the same. Before then, I saw her fanart for various animes and comics circulating my sites of choice, but being younger and much less experienced than her, I was too intimidated to ever approach her until Twitter.

Harumi lives in Florida, so our conversations have always been online. Our correspondence moved from Twitter to Skype to exclusively on Discord nowadays, where we talk almost regularly. She lives with her parents due to medical reasons, and supports herself exclusively through commissions for her art. Being seven years my senior, Harumi has had many years to establish herself within fandoms like Homestuck and One Piece, but her true start as an independent artist making money for her work was in furry art.

Asking her to be my informant was easy – we had spent a lot of time in the past nostalgically looking at our old internet niches and what's changed since then, with most of it being her reminiscing and me listening. She let me in on what was popular during the early 2000s furry scene, with species like "sparkledogs" mirroring the emo/scene counterculture of the era. "Back a decade and a half ago, there were mainly animals like canines and felines. These days you can see reptiles and birds and several aquatic animals too!" She emotes amusedly,

adding, “While there aren’t as many ‘sparklesonas’ these days, pastels are very popular. Natural colors are becoming popular now too.” What is popular amongst fursonas ends up becoming popular amongst fursuits, since it begins with designing the character before forming it into a suit. Interviewing her through Discord felt like any other conversation, but I had never asked about her experiences in the furry community in depth before.

“I draw furry art for both my own enjoyment and entertainment as well as taking furry commissions,” she explained to me as she sent me examples of her artwork – some were other people’s fursonas, others were furry reimaginings of human characters in other media such as the anime Yuri!!! On Ice. “I began building an audience by just drawing and posting furry art [on Furaffinity] and then taking small commissions.” When I asked how she even attracted potential customers, she told me about the technical usage of the website to advertise herself. Through “journals” (which are essentially blog posts) and “banners” (photos embedded on the profile of the user), she was able to let anyone who came onto her profile see that she was available for work. As she did more commissions, word spread between her customers and their friends, until she had a relatively regular income through consistently being contacted on her various social medias.


*Figure 1: an example of a ref sheet Harumi's drawn; this particular one is of her own fursona.*

The prices for her works vary based on how much her customer asks her for. Pictures of fullbody portait of a single character can cost $40-$45 depending on the complexity of the design, and if there is more than one character in the picture, the price more than doubles. It's a matter of making more than minimum wage when working as a freelancer, and Harumi has been in the business long enough to keep her prices within a consistent range that still attracts customers.

When asked whether she has ever been tasked to design someone's fursona for them, she tells me that she's never had to do one from scratch, but instead has been paid to "update" existing designs. "New colors, new hairstyle, things like that," she explains. "But people definitely ask to have fursonas designed for them. Usually people who don't draw but still want a fursona just imagine what they want it to look like and ask someone to help create it." This extends to being asked to design fursuits specifically. "I haven't seen someone make a fursuit because I drew a ref sheet for them, but some of the people I worked with already had fursuits made. They wanted an updated ref sheet to match current changes that were reflected on their suit."

Outside of art-influenced trends, I wanted to know about what's popular amongst fursuits specifically. "I've seen people trying for more semi-realistic styles such as 3D eyes which mean that even if the head of the suit moves, the eyes 'follow' you," she begins. "And overall trying to make fursuits more comfortable to be in, like installing fans in the heads to cool down and being more accurate in shoe size to make walking comfortable. There have also been things like retractable claws and wings that actually clap, or even eyes or other body parts that glow."

The concept of such elaborate suits overwhelms me – I never even knew you could put fans in suits - and she can tell. “Basic suits can already cost you about 2k so things with actual electronics will set you back more, but hey, if people have the money!” she informs me.

In fandom artist spaces, there’s a longtime myth that furries are notorious for spending exorbitant amounts of money for art and fursuits of their fursonas, and it’s tempted many an artist to try their hand at selling to the furry community for cash. When I asked her about it, she confirmed my beliefs. “It’s definitely true, [lol]. I actually heard that a lot of furries for some reason are in IT jobs.” (Whether this is true or not, I have yet to confirm.) She continues, “There are several jokes that ‘furries make the internet go’. They are big on storytelling and roleplay and they love seeing their characters drawn, so it’s no big deal to them to spend if they’re able.”

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Rose, Marlowe, and Harumi have all described a freedom that comes from bearing the suit – not as a mask to hide from people, but as a door that opens themselves to others. The fursuit then becomes a social facilitator, a liberator from human inhibitions. It becomes a representation of actualizing an idealized identity for oneself. It becomes, essentially, a “happy object”. The collective efforts that go into a fursuit, into a physical manifestation of a fursona, becomes a group exercise in prioritizing forms of art that will make the individual in the furry community happiest and most fulfilled – “if we invest in the same objects as being what should make us happy, then we would be orientated or directed in the same way” (Ahmed 35).

But even without any physical manifestations of furry presence, like fursuits or merchandise, the fans of the furry fandom still carve out places for themselves in digital spaces through the works they circulate cost-free. Not all happy objects must be physical for us to

surround ourselves with it. “Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon,” Ahmed explains, and in the context I use, *bodily function* can also apply to a digital realm. “We come to have our likes, which might even establish *what we are like*” (32). Even just coming into contact with these symbolic objects – both physical and digital - affects the fan in unique ways.

## CREATIVE COMPONENT: ILLUSTRATIONS.

As a self-taught illustrator that has been involved in the digital fandom scene since I was 11, I felt that I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to contribute my artwork to my research. Not only is it representative of my place within the Art World that fandoms have created for themselves, it is also an appropriate means of transcribing the rules and affective natures of such a visually striking subculture.

The first piece is a diagram of a furry (not a broken-down fursuit, but of what a typical fursona would look like), then broken up into prices that it would cost for this fursona to be physically actualized. The second piece is a visual transcription of a portion of my interview with Rose, where she discusses how she came to create her fursona’s personality and the importance of her fursona to her growth. The third piece is an abstract depiction of my paper as a whole – discussion on the cost of creation and consumption within the furry fandom, represented by the merchandise t-shirt, convention pass, money, and tablet pen. The split-open fursuit head represents the identity furries form around themselves in physical and digital spaces.

It took me time to learn how to comfortably draw a fursuit/fursona in the recognizable style that is popularized by American fursuits, but the payoff was worth it. My other pieces,

more abstract in nature, are more akin to my original style of visual storytelling, but still focus on aspects of my project that I felt needed to be depicted rather than described.

Artwork is a cornerstone of the furry fandom. It is a commodity just like every other DIY merchandise that the subculture has to offer. It is also a genuine means of expression, appreciation, and communication between members. It is a tangible, understandable conversation that can be had both with people within and outside the subculture. You don't have to be a furry to consume furry art. You also don't have to be a furry to make furry art. Take it from me, as someone who doesn't identity as part of the subculture but has engaged enough as a creator and consumer of furry culture that I am able to draw my findings in a way that is palatable for various audiences.


1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
1. Toony head: starts at $950.
2. Eyes: can be modified to “follow” you.
3. Paws: starts at $150.
4. Tails: starts at $45.
5. Digitigrade feet: $1,250.
6. Outdoor feet paws: starts at $250.
Prices taken from lemonbratfursuits.com.
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I was always the kid that questioned if the Big Bad Wolf was really so bad.
And that was no different for dragons who swept away princesses!
I had always liked to see them in a kinder or more heroic sense,
and that had a huge effect on how Firewings took form.
She's grown up with me, matured with me.
Even as an adult, I can still feel her presence with me, like I would when I was a little kid.
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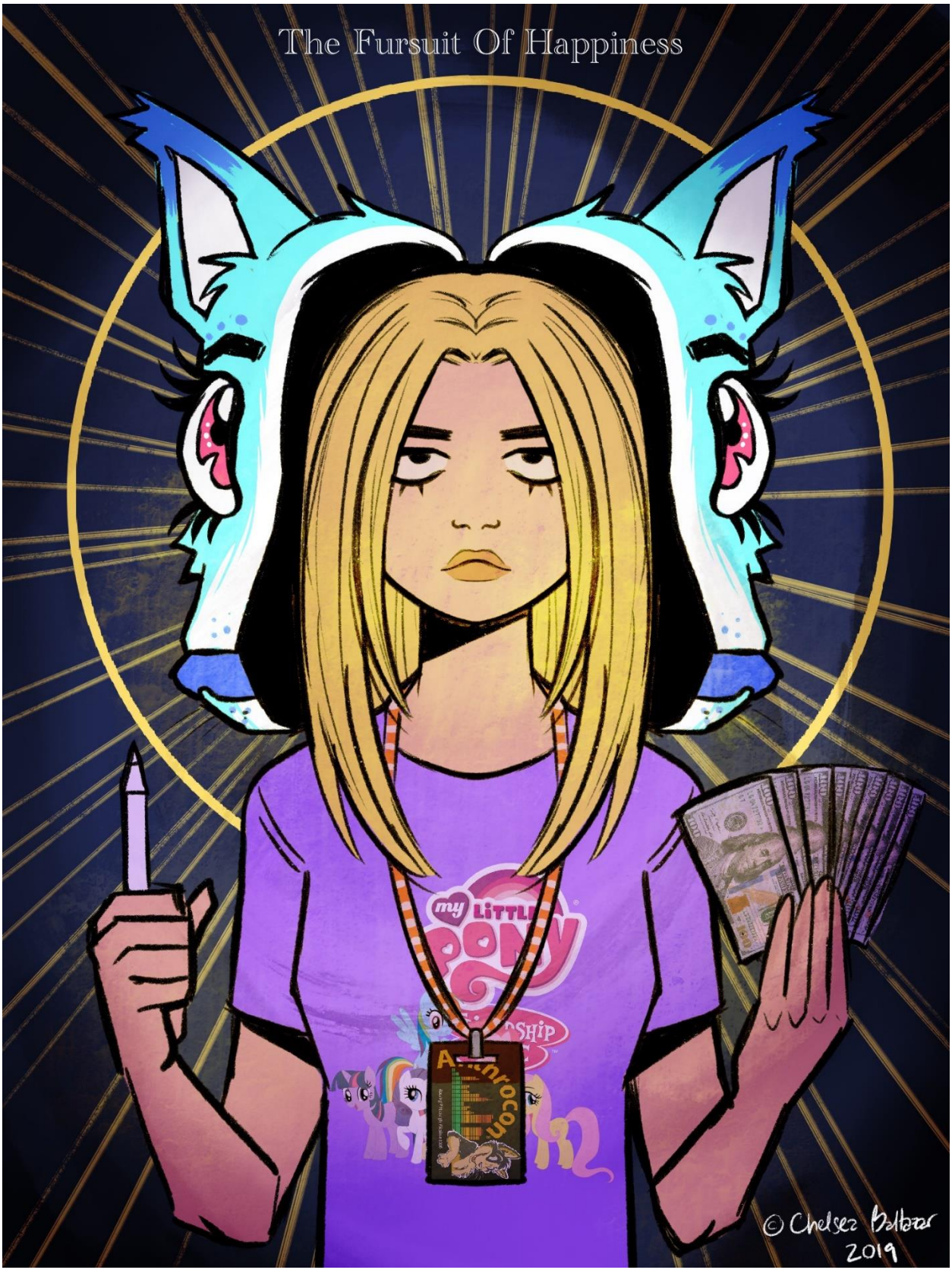
The Fursuit Of Happiness
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## CONCLUSION.

There is an undeniable cost to be in a fandom. The furry fandom is no exception, what with its core text constantly being shared and re-shared through the fans' interpretations of various pieces of media. Consumption of arts – whether it be fursuits, fanart, merchandise at conventions – is what keeps independent artists in a fandom going, but monetary payment is not the only way to ensure the thriving of a community and self. In the words of miss wolfiee, "You don't have to have a fursuit to be a furry!" You don't need proof of being a furry to merit oneself a furry, so long as the general consumption and appreciation of the art form is there, as well as a general networking through the community itself. There are numerous other ways to enrich the experience of being in the fandom besides monetary value, and digital spaces such subcultures in breaking down the physical and monetary barriers that once posed hurdles for fans back then.

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