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## A Peek Inside a Furry Convention

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I couldn't wait to meet a *furry*, someone who adopts the identity or persona of an anthropomorphized animal in social—and often sexual—interactions (“Furry,” 2014). Since first discovering their existence two years ago while working as a research assistant in a sexology lab, whenever people ask me what I do, I respond with a question of my own: “Have you ever heard of furies?” This, in turn, usually brings up uncertain references to pop culture or daytime talk shows depicting or interviewing a furry. These references are often accompanied by questions about why full-grown adults choose to dress up in mascot costumes and how these people manage the acrobatics of sex while wearing said costumes.

My opportunity to see one in the “flesh” arrived in the form of Furnal Equinox, a furry convention that takes place over one weekend every year in Toronto. It is the largest furry convention in Canada, and this year was no exception, with 910 attendees. I attended Furnal Equinox in hopes of learning as much as I could about “the fandom” and uncovering the answers most

sexologists are dying to know: Is it a genuine paraphilia? Or are the media exaggerating? Is it even about sex at all?

I took a taxi to the convention. It was the second day of events and, as the driver arrived near the front of the hotel, I saw a small clustering of what looked to be 6- and 7-foot-tall, brightly colored stuffed animals surrounding the entrance. The cab driver asked me if some sort of comic book convention was going on that weekend. In hindsight, these furies looked adorable, but, at the time, I found them intimidating, as they were looming in height, and I wasn't sure how they would react to me invading their turf. I had thought about renting a fursuit of my own, but with one day's notice and no idea where I could rent such a thing, I decided to brave it in my usual streetwear.

Upon entering the convention area, it was nothing like what I had expected it to look like. In truth, I was expecting the individual conference rooms to be dimly lit and for the corners to be filled with couples—or groups—of costumed folks engaging in kinky sex. But instead, I noticed many other things. I noticed that not everyone was dressed in a full fursuit (a furry costume); some were only wearing partial costumes, such as felt ears and a tail. And as the day went on, I saw furies removing their headpieces for portions of time, to either rest or to have a cigarette outside. Most were young, friendly, and male, with a nerdy or raver-inspired style of dress. The majority looked to be either teen-aged or in their early 20s. Most who kept their headpieces on would only gesture to communicate with me in order to keep in alignment with their *fursona* (their furry role or persona), but of the ones who would speak, the register of their voices suggested they were of the same age group. As someone who grew up with many close friends in the LGBT community, I couldn't help but notice the large proportion of gay and trans individuals. Besides the vendors, hotel staff, and those helping to run the convention, there were very few of us who were dressed in everyday clothes.

The central conference room was called the “Dealers' Den,” and this was where all of the artists and vendors set up their

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booths of merchandise. Among the items for sale were stuffed animals, fursuit paraphernalia (such as fox ears, paws, animal collars, and fluffy tails designed to mimic natural movement), t-shirts with whimsical furry sayings (e.g., “Fur Fag”), fake yet realistic-looking weaponry that could be incorporated as part of one’s fursona, and jewelry. Every artist’s booth had binders and iPads displaying their portfolios, with some censoring the genitalia in adult art, and some, not.

The relationship between furies and the artists whom they commission is integral to the community. Many of the furies themselves are talented artists who design and construct their own fursuits and are commissioned by other furies for artwork and fursuits. A large proportion of furies collect both erotic and non-erotic furry art. For readers who have not seen it, the adult-themed art depicts anthropomorphic creatures with human genitalia engaging in typical sex acts. I was told that the depictions of human genitalia, as opposed to anatomically correct animal genitalia, are to help viewers put themselves in the role of the characters. Judging from the informal conversations I’ve had with the non-furry people in my life, furry pornography is likely what the general public considers the hallmark of furry culture.

In the midst of my perusing merchandise, the gathering’s official fursuit parade began. This is when what appeared to be every imaginable color combination of faux fur emerged from the doors to playfully walk, in single file, around the perimeter of the Dealers’ Den. A total of 265 costumed furies waved as they passed by and happily obliged to be filmed or have their picture taken. No two looked alike. Many wore accessories that reflected their fursona, such as a parasol, suspenders, Clubmaster glasses, and balloons. My favorite was one who appeared to be channeling 90s grunge, with a flannel shirt and Fender Stratocaster. Each fursona was further expressed through body language, which was mostly energetic, childlike, and quite literally bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, with some headpieces possessing eyes that were illuminated.

When selecting a fursuit, I learned the most popular choices were foxes, wolves, and dogs. More recently, the selection of animals had evolved to include hybrids that did not exist in reality, including those blended with mythical creatures (e.g., a dragon mixed with a wolf). I learned that even the most minute details of each fursuit held meaning to the person wearing it, such as a scar on one furry’s headpiece symbolizing a scar on his face in real life. The color of one’s fursuit was based on the type of partner one hoped to attract (e.g., if interested in attracting a male partner, one would select a female-typical color, such as pink, to be the dominant color of their fursuit). There is an important distinction between fursonas and fursuits, as almost all furies have a fursona, but only a small proportion wears a fursuit. Many furies felt that, in everyday life, we are all forced to adopt personas, so their fursona allowed them to be their true selves. The one message that was consistent across my conversations was that each member of the community felt they had something that made them *different* and ill-fitting in mainstream society, such as

Asperger’s syndrome or a facial tic. They found some aspect of childhood, such as cartoon characters or stuffed animals, to be comforting, and this appreciation continued on into their adult lives. The fandom gave them a safe venue in which to express themselves and to feel accepted by others who feel similarly.

After the parade ended, I left the main area to wander around to the other conference rooms. One was filled with furies playing a selection of popular console video games. I noticed a bulletin board with notices for organized fantasy card game sessions. I sat down next to a table of early 20-something males who had removed their headpieces to eat sandwiches from the restaurant next door. I overheard them asking one another what they were studying in university. One replied, “Neuroscience.” (I had to struggle to stifle my immediate reaction to turn and say, “Me too! Which school are you at?” I didn’t want to cross the line between furry life and real life.) I heard them agree there was a large proportion of furies studying the hard sciences.

The convention wound down by evening, with the Dealers’ Den closing, the parade now over, a wedding between two furies conducted earlier that morning, and only a few events remaining for the following day. The fursuits gradually disappeared one by one, and I became increasingly surrounded by plain-clothed individuals, wheeling suitcases and saying their good-bye’s to one another. As I collected my jacket to leave the hotel, I saw a little girl in a baby doll dress, who looked to be about 2 years old, kissing the snout of a male furry who had knelt down to be at her height. I then realized that the furry was her father. I felt unexpectedly touched by the scene.

Furies are well aware that the public perceives their community and lifestyle as being primarily motivated by sex. I would expect that engaging in a conversation with an outsider, such as myself, would lead them to want to promote a cleaner image of the fandom. However, based on my conversations with furies, artists, and vendors that day, I got the sense that there are additional layers of depth behind the decision to become a furry, and that sex—and furry pornography—are only one aspect of their lifestyle, as is the case with any euphilic (i.e., non-paraphilic) individual. The most surprising thing of all to me was how open and welcoming the community was to a non-furry like me. For the entire time that I was at the convention, not a single furry questioned me as to what I was doing there. It seemed everyone was too busy making new friends and having fun.

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