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Alternative Identity Mediation Across Space and Performance

THESIS

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by

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DEDICATION

To

My peers, mentors, and friends

for helping me grow as a person and academic

The furry community

For allowing me to be part of their world
and for the friends made along the way

My Committee

Bonnie P. Ruberg
Bonnie A. Nardi
Joshua G. Tanenbaum

And special thanks to my advisor Josh

For keeping me steady on my path and being a fellow nerd

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Alternative Identity Mediation Across Space and Performance

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The furry subculture is a diverse community that practices a shared interest in anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Anthropomorphism is the application of human characteristics onto nonhuman entities. Zoomorphism is the application of animal traits onto the human. Members of the furry fandom, commonly known as "furries," express their interest in anthropomorphism and zoomorphism through a variety of practices and in a breadth of venues. Two practices of interest are the fursona, the adoption of a furry persona, and fursuiting, wearing a mascot like costume of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic entity. In this project, I conducted an ethnographic inquiry into the furry community. I combine posthumanist perspectives, cultural studies, and media studies along with ethnographic experiences to analyze the practices of fursuiting and the fursona. In my analysis, I argue for how the affordances of digital spaces are reenacted within physical spaces and the role of artifacts as makers of space and as the means through which identity may be constructed, represented, and transferred.

INTRODUCTION

The furry subculture, also known as the furry fandom, refers to a community that possesses a shared interest in anthropomorphism and zoomorphism (Maase, 2015). Anthropomorphism is the application of human traits to nonhumans. Zoomorphism is the application of animal traits to humans. A shared interest in these two phenomena is the broadest unifying criteria for inclusion into the furry fandom. Thus, members of the furry fandom come from a variety of backgrounds. (Seabrook, 2012). Despite this variance, there are common practices amongst community members. These practices are performed in online spaces such as the furry interest site, *Furaffinity*, and in person community meets and conventions. Members of the furry fandom tend to share their interests of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism through practices such as "artwork of bipedal animals, anthropomorphic animal avatars in online communities, and composition of stories featuring anthropomorphic characters" (Roberts et al., 2015). Two unique practices of the furry community are fursuiting and the fursona. Fursuiting is wearing a mascot-like costume of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic being. The fursona is an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic persona. This paper outlines the preliminary results of an ethnographic study that examines how performative, social, and digital spaces interact with fursuiting and the fursona to mediate ideas of identity and space making.

BACKGROUND

The Furry Community

Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism possess long histories, however the furry subculture's ties to these concepts is partnered with the rises of science fiction and animation in the mid-20th century. The 1930's to the 1980s saw a variety of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic entities appearing across mass media. Examples included *Looney Tunes* (1930), Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973), *Star Trek* (1966), *Battlestar Galactica* (1978), *Dr. Who* (1963) etc. Pioneering furrries, generally referred to as "greymuzzles" within the current fandom, began appearing in the 60's and 70's (Merlino et al., 2015). These early adopters were generally composed of enthusiasts of anthropomorphism in animation and science fiction medias. In Merlino et al's anecdotal account of the fandom's history, early furry enthusiasts were scattered into individual pockets across the States and expressed their interests through writing, drawing, and the collection of anthropomorphism in media. Gradually, these pioneering furrries congregated in localized gatherings at homes, schools, and hotel rooms, usually under the umbrella of science fiction or cartoonist gatherings. At these gatherings, attendees would swap furry stories, art, and run video rooms that screened homebrewed recordings of furry media. Steadily these meets evolved into miniature "furry" conventions within larger fan conventions. In 1989, Confurence 0 was organized as the first standalone "furry" convention, popularizing the modern image of the fandom amongst enthusiasts (Merlino et al., 2015; Wikifur).

The modern incarnation of the furry fandom is primarily composed of members who are a generation later than the pioneering "greymuzzles." The International

Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP) is a group of emic researchers dedicated to studying the fandom. The IARP conducts annual surveys online and at convention sites to analyze the demographics of the fandom. The [adjective][species] research blog, is a civilian research group that also annually polls the fandom through online surveys. Both the IARP and the [adjective][species] blog research observed that 75% of the sampled furry population are below the age of 25 with 55% of the sample being between the ages of 18 and 25. Over 80% of the sample identified as white and over 70% sexed and gendered as male. These results were the averages observed over annual surveys administered both online and in convention spaces (JM, 2015; Plante et al., 2016).

Despite these generational differences, some practices have endured. For example, gatherings and conventions are still popular events for meetings fellow enthusiasts and centers of community engagements (Brown, 2015; Maase, 2015; Seabrooke, 2012). However, within the past few decades furies have expanded into online communities. *Furaffinity* (Figure 1) is a furry art hosting website that houses hundreds of thousands of accounts and acts as one of the largest online hubs for the fandom (Furaffinity). Other notable online platforms of the furry community include *Second Life*, a massively online life simulator, and *Furcadia*, a furry centric text-based MUD.

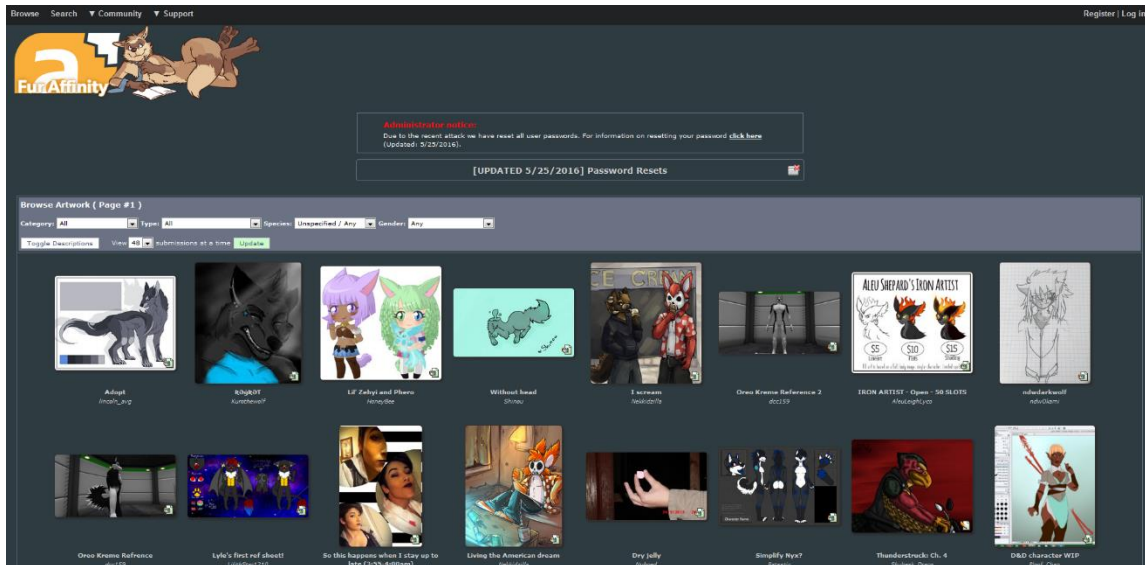


Figure 1 Furaffinity

The front page of Furaffinity.net, featuring a page of recently submitted artwork. (accessed <http://www.furaffinity.net/> 6/1/16)

The furry community is a stigmatized community that the media and public eye often conflated with fetishism and sexual deviance (Brown, 2015; Healy & Beverland, 2013; Maase, 2015; Roberts et al., 2015). One particularly damaging article came from *Vanity Fair* magazine in 2001. The article conflated the community with plushophilia, sexual attraction towards stuffed figures, and portrayed the furry community as "a refuge for socially unskilled sexual fetishists" (Brown, 2015; Maase 2015, Seabrook 2012). Scholars have tracked how portrayals of the furry community "as sexual deviants...or as suffering from psychological disorders" (Healy et al., 2013) have continued over the years. Roberts et al. noted that the "television show, *1000 Ways to Die*...described furrries as 'people who like to put on animal costumes and get together for 'fun things' like group sex'." In the digital domains, Seabrooke (2012) compiled a list of anti-furry websites dating from 1999-2009, with many of the sites attacking the perceived sexual deviance of the subculture.

There is a self-awareness of the stigma within the furry community. Surveys from the [adjective][species] research blog questioned community members on how they perceived the association between the furry culture and sex. The survey asked participants to provide a rating between 1 to 10, with higher numbers representing higher associations between sex and furry. The survey results were averaged over 5 years and noted that only 33% of the sample population responded with a rating of at least 6 when asked to rate how much they personally associated the furry community with sex. When asked how strongly they believed other community members to associate sex with the fandom, approximately 50% of the participants responded with a rating of 6 or more. However, when participants were asked as to how strongly they believed the public connected furies to sex, approximately 90% responded with 6 or above (Figure 2) (JM, 2015).

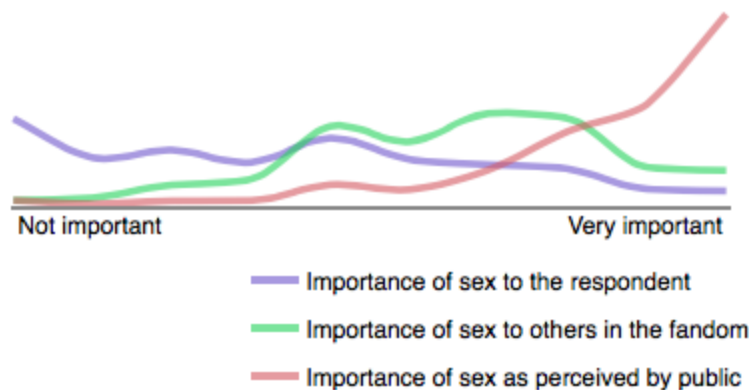


Figure 2 Sexuality in the fandom

Data from the [adjective][species] research blog examining how furry community members perceived the connection between sex and community culture. (accessed <http://www.adjectivespecies.com/2015/08/24/furry-demographics/> 12/4/16)

The response to this stigma varies from individual to individual. Certain events restrict the access of press due to a fear misrepresentation and sensationalism (Brown, 2015). Community performers also tend to follow codes of conduct that emphasize gauging

the willingness of spectators and participants in their routines. Other furry events and individuals embrace the stereotype of sexual deviance. For example, furry art hosting sites such as *Weasyl*, *Furaffinity*, and *Inkbunny* occasionally serve as sites for transactions on furry erotica, with patrons commissioning artists to feature the patrons' characters' in erotic stories, pictures, or other media available to the site.

The Fursona

Within the furry fandom, the fursona is the practice of adopting the persona of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic being. Creating fursonas is a common practice amongst furies. (Roberts et al., 2015). The relationship between fursonas and users can be many to many. A single furry may have multiple fursonas and a fursona may be adopted by multiple furies. Furies may create their own fursona or "adopt" a fursona made by another member of the community. Adopted fursonas are typically referred to as "adoptables." Some adoptables are created with the sole intention of being sold or given to others, whilst other adoptables may be gifted amongst friends and community members. (Maase, 2015). The design of fursonas may draw inspiration from both nature and fiction. Designers may choose to anthropomorphize animals found within nature (Figure 3). However, it is not uncommon for designers to anthropomorphize fictional creatures such as dragons, sea monsters, naga, and impossible animal hybrids. Designers may even create their own entities, rife with fictional histories. (Reysan et al., 2015). Fursonas may possess elaborate, personal stories and can be ascribed with personalities and mannerisms that are distinct from their users (Brown, 2015). For example, the Sergal is a fictional anthropomorphic species created by Japanese artist mick39. Sergals exist in mick39's Vilous universe and is a

species with a storied history (Vilous Wiki). Furrries have since created and adopted their own Sergal characters (Figure 4). Some Sergal characters exist inside the Vilous as in universe characters while others are merely representational.

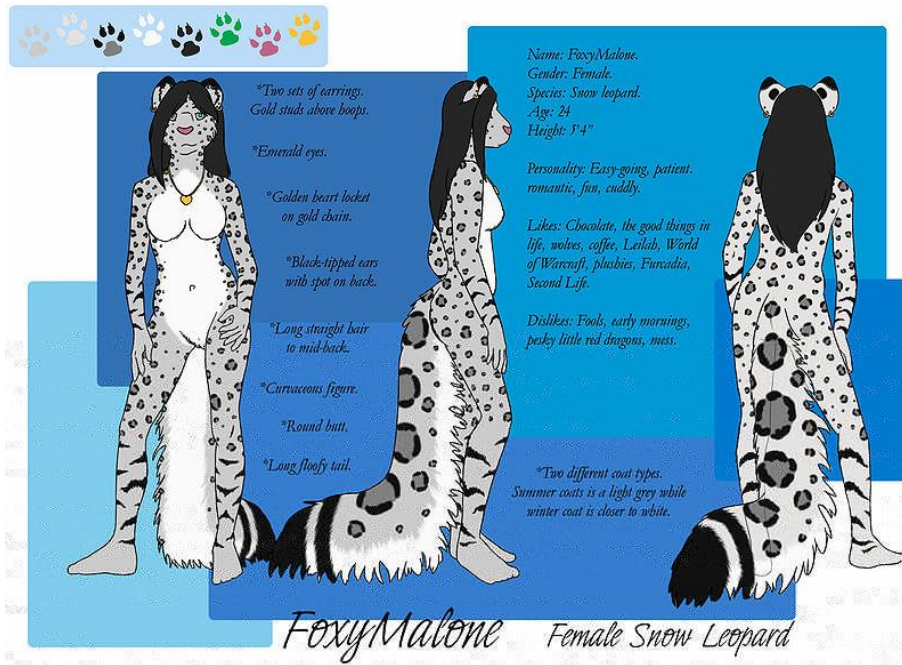


Figure 3 A Leopard Fursona

A fursona sheet. A common reference material used by furrries to outline the specifications of their fursonas. This sheet portrays an anthropomorphized snow leopard. (accessed <http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Fursona>

6/1/16)

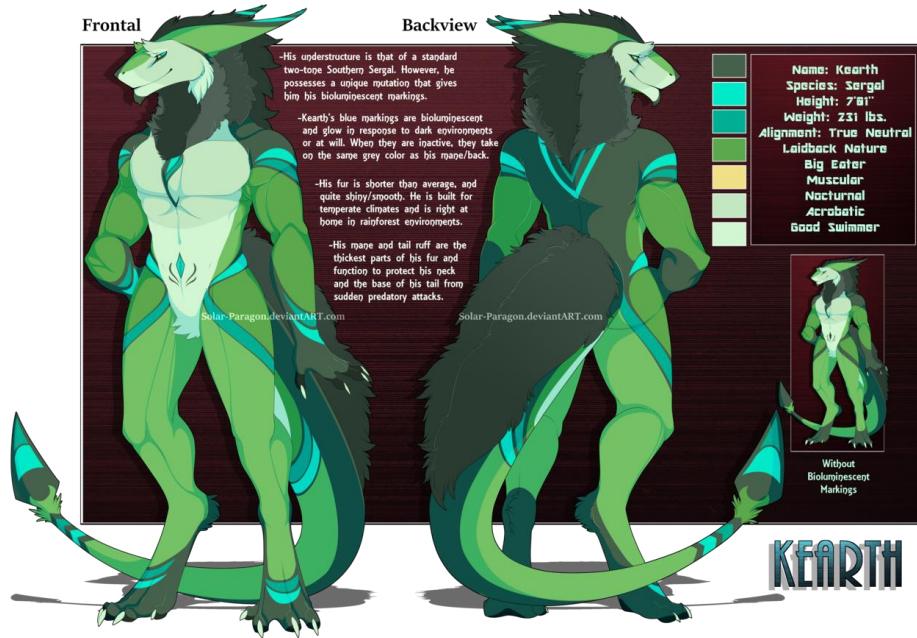


Figure 4 A Sargal Fursona

A fursona sheet that adopts the fictional Sargal species. (accessed <https://www.furaffinity.net/view/20520876/5/15/17>)

From my ethnographic experiences, I have observed the intents behind adopting fursonas crosses numerous thresholds, touching on elements of idealization, performance, play, self-representation, and community. In negotiating these concepts, the use of fursonas intersects with domains of the digital and physical. It is not uncommon for furrries to carry their fursona into digital spaces. Users may create avatars in the likeness of their fursonas in digital worlds (Figure 6) or represent themselves with their fursona on social media platforms (Figure 5). In the physical domain, furrries may directly embody fursonas by fursuiting: the application of a mascot-like costume in the likeness of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic entity.



Figure 5 A Furry Twitter Profile

A Twitter profile of a furry that uses the likeness of the fursona as an avatar. (accessed <https://twitter.com/wolfcau> 12/31/16)



Figure 6 A Furry Second Life Avatar

A fursona created as an avatar for the massive multiplayer online life simulator Second Life (accessed <http://secondlife-furs.livejournal.com/> 12/31/16)

Fursuiting

Fursuits are costumes constructed in the appearance of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic being (Figure 7). Fursuiting, the act of wearing a fursuit, is typically carried out during community events such as meetings and conventions. Though common sights at these events, the possession of a fursuit is not a common desire amongst community members (Maase, 2015). The design of a fursuit may represent a user's fursona or may be created in the likeness of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters from popular media. Fursuits are often designed by craftsman within the furry community and are custom tailored to their users. Commissioned suits may be costly, valuing up to several thousand US dollars (Brown, 2015). The complexity and design of a fursuit varies from unit to unit, though two common varieties exist: partial suits and full suits. Partial suits typically consist of a headpiece, crafted paws meant to cover the hand and feet regions, and occasionally a tail to be fastened around the waist area. Full suits are body suits that envelop the user's entire body (Maase, 2015). Both full suits and partial suits may possess accessories and assistive mechanisms for their users, including internal cooling, lights, and animatronics.

Fursuiting tends to be an object of public and community interest at events. This interest is brought about by the intense visibility of the suits as well as from the tendency of fursuiters, or suiters, to perform (Figure 7). The routine of fursuit performances may play off aspects of the environment, the zoomorphic nature of the suits, or play to the personality traits imbued onto the fursuiter's fursona (Maase, 2015; Brown, 2015). During more public meetups, fursuiters may also include willing outsiders into their performances. Certain events cater specifically to fursuit performances. Conventions and meets occasionally hold events exclusive to fursuiters, including dance competitions, parades, and

costumed athletics (Carlson, 2011).



Figure 7 Fursuit Performance

A group of fursuiters performing an act of CPR. The center portrays two suiters in full suit along with one suiter in partial suit. (accessed <http://www.socalfurs.com/socalfurs-furbq-photos/nggallery/furbq/furbq-2013/page/3> 12/4/16)

Related Works

Fandom Studies and Emic Studies

Studies into how media interacts with fandoms has been available for decades. The early 90s saw a large focus on the culture television fandoms (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Friske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jenson, 1992). Dedicated studies on specific fan cultures such as science fiction, anime, and video games have also enjoyed a history of academic attention (Bukatman, 1993; Chandler-Olcott et al., 2003; Gee, 2003; Moylan, 1986; Suvin, 1979). However, the furry fandom has been overlooked from this history, as Roberts et al. (2015) noted “a relative lack of scientific study of the fandom.” With the opening of Confurence 0 in 1989, the furry community has existed in the public sphere for nearly three decades. However, the primary corpus of research has only been written within the past half-decade (Carlson, 2001; Healy et al., 2013; Reysen, et al., 2015).

The current corpus of literature on the furry fandom is splintered, with research hailing from psychology (Plante et al., 2015; Reysan et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015), fine arts (Brown, 2015), theatre arts (Carlson, 2011), marketing (Healy et al., 2013), and anthropology (Seabrook, 2012). The level of involvement researchers have had with the furry community is greatly varied. Scholars that are less personally involved with the fandom typically address the fandom as a tangential point in their work (Brown, 2015; Carlson 2011). More dedicated examinations stem from isolated pockets of researchers that are not in discourse with each other. These more thorough observations into the subculture are nearly exclusive to in-community researchers. For example, one of the major contributors to the current corpus on furry literature is the International

Anthropomorphic Research Project or IARP. The IARP is a research group of in community scholars that examine psychological, sociological, and anthropological phenomena within the furry fandom (Plante et al., 2016). Other notable research contributions from within the furry community include the ethnographic accounts of Seabrook (2012) and Maase (2015). Seabrook (2012) approaches the furry fandom through mixture of digital and physical ethnography, while Masse (2015) participates in a traditional ethnography of the subculture.

Sociable Media and Virtual Worlds

Scholarship on social computing is a descendent of what Donath (2004) terms as sociable media: "media that enhance communication and the formation of social ties among people." By Donath's definition, computer mediated communications may be considered a domain of sociable media. Early CMC scholars such Kochen (1978) recognized CMC as a "new linguistic entity with its own vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics." Research into these unique pragmatics cultivated experimentation in what Erickson et al. (1999) termed as socially translucent systems: "which provide perceptually-based social cues which afford awareness and accountability." More modern research has further expanded on examining the unique social affordance offered by computing. Ellison et al.'s (2007) examination on the use of social capital noted that social media possessed "technological capacities that bridge online and offline connections." The interaction of these offline and online connections has been further explored by social theorists. Boyd (2010) and Papacharissi (2015) have examined the ability for computing to tread between public and private spaces, allowing the creation of "imagined collectives." Bernal's (2014) work on online

social organization for nations in Diaspora, observed how social networking reimagined ideas of sovereignty and nation. Kuntsman & Stein (2015) explored the use of social computing as a means for organizations to reinforce norms and predominant political narratives whereas Miller (2016) has explored ways wherein individuals use social media to create alternative narratives for the real identity. I reference these scholars to build upon the social affordances permitted by mediated communications and the construction of the virtual through the fursona and fursuiting.

I argue that scholarship on virtual worlds is an extension of work on social computing. Research in virtual worlds accelerated particularly during the beginning of the millennium with a surge of interest multi-user dungeons (MUDS) (Dibbell 1998, Cherny 1999, Jakobson 2002). As the interest in virtual worlds persisted throughout the 2000s, social sciences began interacting with more advanced virtual worlds in a variety of capacities. Taylor's (2006) ethnography of the massively multiplayer online community of *Everquest* examined ways in which the connections between the virtual and physical world were bridged. Taylor revealed how narratives of virtual worlds persist into physical space through modes of community building and interspatial play. Boellstrof's (2008) work in of *Second Life* is a pioneering application of traditional ethnographic practices to virtual domains. Nardi's (2010) concurrent work built on activity theory to examine aspects of play and work within virtual domains. Nardi and Boellstrof's ethnographies demonstrated the practical application of social theory to virtual spaces. Williams et al (2011) further expands the methodology on studying virtual worlds by merging survey data with ethnographic observations to explore the identity politics of roleplay in massive online

worlds. Williams et al's work observed the interactions between demographic information of roleplayers and the exploration of impossibilities through roleplay.

Objects, Alternative Identity and Performance

A sizeable portion of my analysis of fursuiting and the fursona focuses on the connection of objects to ideas on identity and performance. Connections between performance and identity studies can be traced back to the research of Goffman (1959). Goffman posits that the everyday self is composed of a series of performances or fronts meant to inhabit specific spheres of the moment. Building on the ideas of Goffman, Johnstone (1982) observes the role of performative apparatuses, particularly masks, and how these apparatuses may be "possessed" by identities. In a similar vein, Holland et al (1998) examined the role of artifices in the construction of group identities. In their "figured worlds" model, artifacts become physical signifiers that evoke the cultural identities of a group.

My analysis of the fursona expands upon the role of character building in performance and identity play as explored by media scholar Gee (2007). Gee posits the theory of the three selves in interactive media. He notes that interactive media allows the embodiment of three identities: the real, the virtual, and the projected. The real identity is defined as the physical body that enacts day to day routines. The virtual identity is an identity formed by a media, such as an avatar in a video game. Gee argues that the projected identity is the imposition of the real, physical, identity's values upon the virtual identity. Projective identity places characters as projects that users build upon through the literal acquisition of clothing, gear, and abilities. I argue that my observations of the fursona

display a case of reverse projection, an imposition of the virtual identity's values onto the real, wherein the real person aspires to build to the characteristics of the imagined. Krasner (2000) posits a similar case which he refers to as "borrowed intentions." Borrowed intentions argues that while actors inhabit a role, they "adopt a set of borrowed intentions that govern their behavior." Krasner's borrowed intentions and Gee's projective identity interact with what Suits (2014) terms as illusory rules, "the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur." In the case of fursuiting and the fursona, all three theories overlap into the construction of liminal space wherein the user is afforded the ability to project intentions and qualities onto themselves.

Posthumanism and Matter

Projection by fursuiting and fursonas calls attention to the roles that objects, both physical and virtual, play in the negotiation of identity and identity's relation to performance. To examine the roles of objects, I build upon three posthumanist authors: Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Ana Tsing. These scholars write in the context of worldly relatedness and the involuntary cooperation between objects and phenomena to create meaning. As each individual author contributes a substantial amount to my analysis of the fursuit and the fursona, I will provide an in-depth introduction to their theories here.

Fursuiting and the fursona touch on what Barad (2007) terms "agential realism." Barad's concept of agential realism is an ontological reimagining of viewing the world through a series of phenomena and intra-actions. Central to these concepts is the role of matter and how matter attains meaning. Barad argues against the powers granted to language noting how representationalism "displays a deep mistrust of matter, holding it off

at a distance" (p. 131). She advocates for a reobservation of matter mattering, acting as both a generative and generated force within interactions. The argument calls for what Barad refers to as a "posthumanist performative" approach that "shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions of reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices, doings, and actions" (p.135).

Agential Realism frames phenomena as the basic ontological unit. Phenomena themselves are "differential patterns of mattering ("diffraction patterns") produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production" (p. 140). The term diffraction draws from Haraway, who Barad notes as focusing on "patterns of difference" (p. 29). Barad's use of diffraction positions phenomena within a continuum: ontologies do not exist as references to each other, but rather coexist as practices in constant intra-action. In this analysis, Barad distinctly highlights the role of intra-action over interaction. Intra-action draws attention to the boundary forming roles of relations between subject and object and argues that "relata do not preexist relations" (p 140). Barad builds on these precedents to push for a performative approach of building meaning. Within the performative, concepts of matter and discourse become practice.

Matter in the agential realist sense does not refer to a fixed object of material perception. Rather, "matter is substance in its intra-active becoming- not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (p. 151). In this sense, matter are phenomena in which intra-actions converge upon, entities that do not preexist but gain substance through how they are acted on, around, and to. Agential realism distances itself from the centrality of the human through this same process. Like matter, humans do not preexist and instead gain

their properties and boundaries from intra-actions within and between phenomena.

In her analysis of relationality, Haraway (2016) uses the term sympoiesis to advocate a relational way of thinking. Rooted in the genealogies of environmental sciences, sympoiesis refers to "collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries" (p. 61). Much like Barad, Haraway argues for thinking of the world as a web of constantly shifting relations where ontologies "do not precede their relatings, they make each other through semiotic material involution" (p. 60). Contextualizing her arguments within biological and environmental studies, Haraway criticizes the "preexisting bounded units (genes, cells, organisms, etc.) in interactions that can only be conceived as competitive or cooperative" (p. 60).

Haraway's use of meaning making systems approaches phenomena as merged in a larger ecosystem without boundaries. Analogizing to compost, Haraway examines how entities "become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding" (p. 97). I draw on sympoiesis to characterize the interconnected ecosystem of the fursona, performance, and identity.

Tsing (2015) frames her analysis of relationality around the concept of precarity. She defines precarity as an uncertainty or vulnerability to others wherein "[u]nable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shuffling assemblages, which remake us as well as others" (p. 20). Tsing argues that our current era is one of precarity, criticizing the linearity of capitalist and modernist ideals such as "progress." Critical to Tsing's analysis of precarity is the borrowed ecological concept of assemblages. Tsing characterizes assemblages as "open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about

communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making" (p. 23).

Tsing's use of assemblages encompasses gatherings of both human and nonhuman collections. She examines these collections in relation to the journey of matsutake mushrooms. In observing the path of the mushrooms from the fields to the home, Tsing characterizes a deeply relational world, wherein entities "contaminate" each other with their collective histories. In one example, he notes how "small memories come together in the smell [of the mushroom]. It brings to mind the paper dividers on village interior doors" (p. 48). Tsing uses the smell of the mushroom as a representational abstraction of histories of matsutake farming. Tsing argues that these contaminations are universal and are a force of constant, involuntary collaboration that drives the creation of diversity.

Tsing argues that precarity allows for considerations of a contaminated, collaborative world as precarity dismantles the "unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize - counter factually - that we each survive alone" (p. 29). However, Tsing's use of precarity carries two possible interpretations: a vulnerability to others, and an uncertainty brought about by a lack of stability. In examining fursuiting I argue that the furry subculture engages with precarity from the stability approach. It should be noted that I am not utilizing the term precarity in the survivalist perspective that Tsing adopts, but from the perspective of an uncertainty brought on by a liminal transience.

METHODS

Epistemology

I frame this project through the lens of the social constructivist worldview. Creswell (1997) defines three aspects of the social constructivist worldview: First, humans construct meanings as they engage with the world. Second, sense making is centered around cultural and historical perspectives. Third, community and sociality are the primary vectors through which meaning is generated. In approaching the furry fandom, I adopt the social constructivist philosophy as part ongoing relationship I have had with this community as observer and outsider. It should be noted that, during these experiences, I have not considered myself as a member of the furry community, though I had direct interactions with this community.

While I had been exposed to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic media throughout life, I was first made aware of the term “furry” in the year 2006 through an artist’s profile on the site DeviantArt. At the time, I had been exploring various online communities because of my interests in creative content. Upon encountering chatrooms in DeviantArt that labeled themselves as furry interest or anthro enthusiasts sites, I decided to open my exploration to another community, furies. My first experiences in these chatrooms was mostly as a silent observer. In online interactions, I opted not to speak and tended to only comment irregularly or when addressed. Occasionally, I would engage in roleplay in these chatrooms. I took on the role of an eccentric robot with a tendency to explode at the slightest provocation. The robot persona I developed was meant to signify my willingness to engage in play with the chatroom, but at the same time note my “apartness” due to a lack of a zoomorphic representation.

My interaction with the DeviantArt chatrooms only provided a glimpse into the furry community. In my time there, I watched acts of play, virtual community building, and philosophical discussions of the nature of their community. However, I did not yet know about the concept of the fursona and fursuiting, as well as the specifics of the actual furry community. My involvement with the community became more pronounced three years ago when I attended my first furry convention, Califur 2013. At Califur, I once again assumed the role of an outsider, staying to the sides and quietly spectating the space around me. I became an annual visitor to the convention and for a time Califur became my sole physical experience with the furry community. Over time, these visits introduced me to the phenomena of fursuiting, fursonas, and fursuit performances. It was during Califur 2016 that I became more directly involved with the furry community. I assumed a position in Califur's gaming staff, managing the events and inventory of the convention's gaming room. My experience as a staff member introduced me to the storied culture of the furry fandom and exposed the workings of a close-knit, breathing community.

Despite my more involved participation with the fandom, I held to the stance that I was not a furry. I was not alone in this outlook. In Califur staff I had met peers and friends who regularly engaged with furries but did not consider themselves furries. One such friend noted that their interest in the community stemmed from the feeling of diversity and openness that the fandom displayed. This research project also positions me as an outsider. While my ethnographic approaches have entailed the adoption of an alternative community persona, I do not consider this a persona as a fursona as I do not consider myself a furry. More accurately, I am an academic interested in the mediation of identity

through play and alternative personas. Through this lens, I aim to contextualize the phenomena of fursuiting and the fursona within the eyes of a researcher.

Ethnography

This project was carried out in part through an eight-month ethnography, which began at the end of August 2016 and continued through the end of April 2017. Participant observation was performed at local furry community events known as "furmeets." Furmeets consist of weekly meetups between members of the community in a variety of locations and themes. For example, *Tail!* is a meet held at a gay bar in Long Beach. *Tail!* themes itself around a party atmosphere, filled with a night of drinking, karaoke, and dancing. The *Prancing Skiltaire* meet or *PS* meet, is held at the personal home of a founding "graymuzzle" of the furry community. The *PS* evokes furmeets from the community's early history. The organizers screen furry media nonstop in the living room and permit attendees to erect board games and gaming consoles around the residence. *Tail!*, and the *PS* comprised my primary sites for ethnographic data collection. Supplemental data was collected from less regular meets such as the *Rose Bowl Fur Meet* and larger, rarer events such as the *Socal FurBQ* (Figure 8). It should be noted that, to conduct my research, I exclusively attended furmeets in the southern California region.



Figure 8 The Socal FurBQ

The Socal FurBQ is a biannual furmeet held at Irvine National Park. The meet is the largest nonconvention furry event in southern California and internationally attracts hundreds of furrries. (accessed <http://www.socalfurs.com/socalfurs-furbq-photos/nggallery/furbq/FurBO-2016---End-of-Summer> 12/4/16)

Each furmeet drew a different population of attendees. For example, *Tail's* audience mostly consisted of young adults, likely due to the venue's lively atmosphere and the 21-year age restriction for patrons. Furthermore, *Tail!* drew in many furrries who were newer to fandom or were relatively inexperienced with in person furmeets. By contrast, the *PS* meet attracted attendees from a variety of age groups, ranging from teenagers, young adults, and greymuzzles in their 50s. Attendees to the *PS* were generally more familiar with the fandom, with many having participated for a number of years. There was a degree of overlap between the population of the two sites, primarily consisting of regular community members local to the southern California region.

My engagement with the furry community has taken the role of both participant and observer. In my observer role, I was a curious bystander. I would quietly walk through meeting sites observing fursuit performances and overhear conversations of fursona use, construction, and debates on the nature of the fandom. In my participant role, I adopted the

use of an alternative persona. At furmeets, I would typically carry a ginger cat hand-puppet atop my fist and introduce myself to others through the puppet. I adopted the pseudonym “Cat” for both myself and the puppet. While using the puppet I typically performed as a mischievous, naïve, talking cat. “Cat” would often refer to himself in third person and interacted with furies with inane comments or a simple “meow.” At times, I would “converse” with the puppet, playing to others that the puppet inhabited personality of its own. The intentions of this performance were twofold. First, it was meant to encourage others in the space to socialize with me by giving off an air of playfulness and levity. Second, the performance was a signifier of my willingness to engage with and be included in the community space.

My performance experience with the community was restricted to interactions with the hand-puppet. When the puppet was absent, I acted in accordance with social “norms” that would be expected a typical gathering of enthusiasts. I would engage with the amenities of the space, choosing to socialize with other attendees through conversation, games, and food. I also took part in these interactions when using the puppet, but with an added level of absurdity, such as placing a straw in the puppet’s mouth or using the puppet’s paws to fumble with game board pieces. However, despite the prevalence of my performances with the puppet, I did not consider this alternative persona as a fursona. I regarded my actions as means to entertain and interact, often referring to the puppetry as “my gimmick.” Despite that classification, furies interacted with my puppet in similar ways as they interacted with fursuits. I will discuss the nuances of these interactions later on.

Interviews

Interview participants were recruited from southern California furmeets over the course of 8 months. 7 Adult participants were gathered through in person interactions. Prior to individual interviews, I provided participants with an explanation of the study, alongside a study information sheet. Interviews were semi-structured with a set of core questions, accompanied by a series of follow up questions based on participant responses. The duration of individual interviews varied from 10 to 55 minutes and totaled to approximately 3 hours of audio recorded and partially transcribed interview data. Of the 7 participants, 4 were interviewed on site at furmeets, 1 was interviewed in a laboratory setting, and 2 participants were interviewed over voice-chat services.

Core interview questions included:

- Tell me about your fursona. How do they relate to you personally, if it all?
- How long have you considered yourself to be a furry?
- Do you roleplay or perform as your persona? If so, in what spaces?
- Are there offline or online spaces where you adopt aspects of your fursona without explicit performance (avatars, names, mannerisms, etc.)?
- Do you keep separate online presences between yourself and fursona? If so, why?
- In what ways do you use online platforms to participate in the furry community? To what extent do these platforms allow you to participate in the way you desire?
- How would you change these platforms to better facilitate your participation in this community?
- Do you attempt to keep your involvement in the community secret or private, and if so then how do you negotiate this?

OBSERVATIONS

Furmeets as Performative Sites

Fursuiting was a common practice at these meets and was generally encouraged by organizers. Though suiters did not compose a majority of the attendees at furmeets, it was not uncommon to witness a colorful array of phantasmal costumes milling about events. The interactions between attendees without suits and fursuiters depended largely on the actions of the fursuiter. When fursuiters engaged in performance, attendees tended to either participate with the performance or shy away from the suiter. Similarly, if the fursuiter engaged in more mundane activities with attendees, such as socializing, many attendees would reciprocate the activity with the suiter.

Performances by fursuiters often toyed with absurd, light-hearted antics that played off the zoomorphic nature of their costumes. For example, during one of the *PS* meets a dog fursuiter tossed a giant bacon plush at attendees with a mock bark before retrieving the bacon and scurrying away. Certain suiters chose to remain mute while performing, as one participant, AR, noted:

“When I fursuit as Dan¹, I do not speak, I am highly silent, I communicate with only squeakers in my paws. Or just with like gestures and such. [...] Cause Dan is sort of a generic looking dog character and I can use that to just be a generic-ish dog. And I can focus on just my looks and just on being cute and adorable to entertain people.”

¹ Fursona and fursuit names have been anonymized to preserve participant anonymity

The nature of these performances also played off the atmosphere of the venue. For example, during *Tail!* Fursuiters would perform pole dances, karaoke, and pile together on couches in giant “fur piles.” In outdoor meets such as the *Rose Bowl Fur Meet*, fursuiters would engage in sword fighting, Frisbee, and pose for photos from passersby. Some furies broadcasted these performances across social media. One participant, SY, noted that he occasionally posted his karaoke numbers from *Tail!* Onto social media. SY also participated in “Fursuit Friday,” the practice of broadcasting a photo of his fursuit across social media each Friday.

Most furmeets were open to the public and encouraged interaction from spectators. With the exception of the *PS* meet, most furmeets occurred at commercial or state establishments, be they parks, stores, or diners. The intense visibility of fursuits in these public spaces gained immediate attention from outsiders. It was common for passersby to stare, point, and comment on the fursuiters with a mixture of intrigue, amusement, and sometimes disgust. Occasionally, bystanders would approach the fursuiters asking for pictures or to ask questions about the event. Fursuiters generally posed for photos, waved, or acted out comedic routines (Figure 7) for spectators as they passed. The level of engagement fursuiters took with outsiders was based on the willingness of the outsider. When asked about his approach towards involving spectators, SY outlined the following procedure:

"First, make eye contact, then wave a little bit and approach slowly. Gauge their reactions, and if they appear receptive to the presence of a giant fox then, get in a little bit closer and wave a little more, offer them a hug if they want it.

But if they don't feel receptive to it. Say, maybe there's a little kid and clinging to their mom. Or screaming, or brushing off like 'psh, yeah whatever, a guy in a suit.' Then obviously that's a clear sign not to push it any further and go about on your way."

In my own experiences with my cat puppet, I kept my performances to myself and to furies that were willing to humor me. However, there were times where bystanders took notice of my puppetry and involved themselves. In a particular instance at *Tail!*, a bystander asked to have their photo taken with the puppet. Of note in these experiences was the willingness of both furies and bystanders to humor my performances despite my lack of a full suit. This phenomenon was not limited to my puppetry as furies in partial suits, particularly ones that had headpieces, often engaged in performances and were also engaged during their performances by bystanders and other furies.

The Fursona as Both an Idealization and Representation of Self

Interview participants perceived their relationship with their fursona in a variety of ways. One participant, M, reflected on how his multiple fursonas reflected individual aspects of his personality:

" They're actually parts of my personality. M is my more adventurous, happy, and mischievous side. Whereas ST he's the polar opposite of M, he's like M's split personality where he is a troublemaker, breaking all the rules, he loves mans and mans love him so, he loves to flirt with guys and gals a lot, more

specifically gals because more fun to flirt with them cause they know they aint getting any."

Conversely, another participant described his fursonas as idealized versions that existed on a more holistic scale with each other.

"They weren't separate characters, they were actually me. I actually don't have characters so much as I have alter egos. They were a dimension of myself. You could say it was an idealized version"

In both cases some participants attributed stories and histories to their fursonas. These stories ranged from phantasmal, to more events that were relatable on personal scale to the user:

" I have made stories for my sonas, yeah. Like each sona I've made has their own back story because I just wanted to give them that little bit of like history. Because like, again I'm a creative person. So I always like thinking, "Okay there has to be a reason this sona has like a star or there has to be a reason this one has wings." All that [...] There are a few instances where like I will relate it to my personal history, yes."

However, not all participants created histories for the fursonas. One in particular noted his aversion to such worldbuilding:

"I see so many people they create their own, they create their fursona, and they create these elaborate backstories, how interacts with their existing characters, they're likes, dislikes, favorite colors, and they nail everything down to their birthday or something. And it feel its' sort of cruel to impose on that character, why not let the character be themselves? I wanted to character to talk to me. I don't want to tell the character what they want to be, I want the character to tell me what they are."

The fursona thus presents a varied cross section of identity mediation. It serves as a persona that embodies ideas of the practical and imaginary. A fursona may inhabit the phantasmal narratives and serve as a medium to explore impossibilities of the ideal. Yet, a fursona may also serve as a reflection of the user's current self. In this project, I am to examine how these variances interact with posthumanist theory, performance studies, virtual worlds to create an intricate landscape identity construction and social practices.

The Internet Gateway

The internet served as gateway into the furry community for a majority of the interviewed participants. Similar to my own experience, multiple participants stated that online media was how they first learned about the furry fandom, as well as their first medium of participation. Platforms that participants used to interact with the fandom included IRC channels, *DeviantArt*, *Furcadia*, *Furaffinity*, *Facebook*, *Myspace* and *Second Life*.

One of the participants, TR, reflected on the particular affordances offered by these digital spaces:

"First of all, being in a surrounding area where everyone is either really open-minded or a furry, or chances are they're in to the same stuff you're in to. That in of itself is something I can't really get in the real world."

Other participants echoed the accessibility of the internet aiding in acts of expression and discovery within the fandom. Another participant, AR, commented on the freedom of exploration offered within digital spaces.

"You can be anyone you want to be, and most of the time you end up being not who you are in the real world. And it's not so much having multiple personalities as much exploring parts of your personalities you can't explore in the real world."

AR went on to reflect on the ability to achieve impossibilities within digital spaces such as *Second Life*. Notably AR stated that digital platforms allowed him to circumvent the natural impossibilities of embodying his fursona. *Second Life* permitted AR to embody his fursona's full 8 feet height as well as play out her phantasmal history. Another participant, CV, also commented on the ability to achieve impossible feats within digital spaces. CV purchased an island in *Second Life* and hosted it as a meeting place for fellow furies:

“Some of it was wish fulfillment, I’ve always wanted to feel more empowered, at the time I my work I was very not empowered. So by owning that island I was able to give back to the community, I was able to run things. I was able to take charge of some small aspect of this world that I cared about. So having that ability to empower myself was wish fulfillment to extent.”

DISCUSSION

Fursuiting as Sociable Media

Drawing on Donath's (2004) idea of sociable media as "media that enhance communication and the formation of social ties among people," I propose that fursuiting acts as sociable media. Donath defines mediated communication as "any communication in which the participants communicate via some sort of medium, such as written letters, telephone calls, email, etc." She contrasts this with unmediated communication in which "social cues are communicated through words, tone of voice, gesture, clothing, facial expression, proximity, etc." (Donath, 2004). While fursuiting performance may engage with gestures, voice, and proximity, they subvert these elements to create an alternative space of communication. For example, the manipulation of speech is a large part of some fursuit performances. AR's performance in his dog fursuit, relies on silence and gesture play. The subversion of speech allows AR's suit to mediate a playful, performative atmosphere to spectators. It is in this mediation of AR's communication where he becomes separated from the information encoded within the fursuit. Speaking breaks this mediation by returning to the elements of social cues, as participant JD notes:

"I'd say that talking is a big factor. If you hear their voice then it kind of connects to me: 'Oh, it's the same person [in the suit].' [...] [Talking] I guess anchors that sort of human element back into play. But if the person doesn't talk and they just act kind of silly, then it's like, it's different. It's not a bad thing, but it conveys a different personality."

The presence of a fursuit further mediates communications through the manipulation of tone and facial expressions. Fursuiters have their face, and by extension expressions, hidden by a face mask. The face mask of most fursuits possess a neutral or jovial expression. These expressions may be coupled with the vibrant colors and cartoonish features on many suits. The combination of these aesthetics encodes messages of playfulness and levity into the suit, which in turn is communicated to spectators.

Participant TR commented on the phenomena as follows:

"If somebody is in a fursuit, they typically, I wouldn't say they're happy, but for the most part if you're going to be in fursuit, I have yet to meet somebody who was depressed or sad that was in a fursuit. So it almost becomes an association type of thing. If you are in a fursuit, chances are, with how hot it is and the fact that you're gonna be really active and people are gonna want to see you and take pictures, you have to be emotionally and physically be up for it."

Fursuits also deconstruct the challenges of unmediated communication by acting as a physical and social filter between the fursuiter and others. For example, participant CV commented on his fursuit enabling him to tap into dormant social skills:

"I was able to do, things I was formally afraid to do: initiate, you know, social interactions and were just like 'hey how you doing today!' I mean, I'd be shy for that. "Well I don't know them, why would I want to ask a stranger how they're doing?" But with my fursuit it's like 'Who cares? I'm a giant bird!' [...] Some

people treat it like "Oh when I put on the suit I am a whole new person." For me it was never the case. It was never new, it was clearly me."

In CV's case, the social anxieties of initiating conversation were mitigated by the social absurdity of wearing a giant bird costume. The fursuit thus mediates communication through filtration and amplification social cues. Physically, fursuits filter users from the outside world, blocking facial expressions and affording a certain separation from the elements of proximity. Socially, fursuits amplify gestures and performance play, funneling communication through lenses of absurdity.

Reverse Projection

I argue that fursonas subvert Gee's ideas of projective identity. In my argument, it is important to consider where the fursona stands in relation to virtual identities and projected identities. Fursonas fulfill a variety of functions ranging from idealizations of self to theatrical characters for the purposes of play and performance (Maase, 2015). It could be argued that whether fursonas are what Gee terms as a projected identity or virtual identity varies from individual to individual. However, in both cases I argue that the fursona projects upon the real, physical identity.

Miller's examination on the visual natures of social media cited the use of photographs to evoke "best or idealized versions" of selves that carried fantastical narratives of affluence and wealth. Similarly, fursonas alter the narratives of the real identity through the practices of aesthetics and roleplay. Fursuiting presents a case in which the aesthetic characteristics of the fursona are imposed upon the real identity. This physical projection of aesthetics is not limited to fursuiting. Furrries may adorn themselves

with trinkets, tattoos, clothing, etc. as a gesture of solidarity with their fursona, as one participant noted:

“[I]ncidentally, I’m wearing, it’s like a purple amethyst necklace, that is what my fursona has had before I even wore it myself. So, I sort of grew into that I guess, earrings as well. Yeah and I do cosplay, I wear like a white sash occasionally, which he had before I had. So yeah, I have tailored my outward expression toward that”

Fursonas also impose behavioral values of their adopters. Krasner’s “borrowed intentions” posits that the actor acquires a character’s intents whilst performing their role. In the case of fursonas, where many play the role of idealized version of the user, I argue that the borrowed intentions are intentions based on how a fursona’s user may aspire to be. For example, one participant noted that he had his named legally changed to match the name of his fursona, J. When asked for his reasoning he explained as follows:

“Like I said, I designed my fursona, sort of grew that in a, sort of idealized who I want to be, and I guess you could say in some sense I wasn’t satisfied with my original name for a couple reasons. Without going into too much history stuff, I’ll say, one: the name’s exactly the same as my father’s. I, as you’ve are aware of sure, a lot of people design fursonas to be who they want to be, and at least my case having the same exact name as my father, it had kind

of, it felt kind of restrictive, it felt like I didn't have a unique identity so, at least that's one reason so I took on the name J. "

In J's case, his fursona represents an idealized version of who he aspires to be. By changing his name to match his fursona, J borrows its idealized intents of self-determination, independence, and individuality and applies it to his "real" self.

Private to Polysemic Spheres

Papacharissi (2015) draws from Boyd's ideas of affordances and "context collapse," arguing that the dissolution of private and public borders in social media leads individuals to "crafting polysemic performances that must convey some form of meaning to all without compromising their own sense of who they are." I observed the formation of similar polysemic performances amongst furies. However, the natures of fursonas complicated the relationships between private and public borders. The affordances of social media platforms such as Twitter and Telegram allow multiple layers of separation between a furry and their fursona. For example, Twitter does not require users to associate their legal name with their account, thus Fursonas may possess Twitter profiles completely independent of their users. The theatrical nature of some fursonas may evoke aesthetics, behaviors, and titles that are distinct from their users. The possibility of a furry possessing multiple fursonas as well as changes in ownership of fursonas over time may further complicate these interactions. I originally hypothesized that the layers of possible separation between user and fursonas on social media creates an artificial sphere of the private and predicted that user interactions with their fursonas exist in a perceived sphere

of privacy where performances lose meaning. However, the data instead suggests that interaction of the fursona between the user and others evokes a constant negotiation between private and public spheres.

This negotiation is linked to the role of the fursonas as an alternative projection of self. Participants noted the ability for fursonas to represent idealized versions of themselves as well as portions of their personalities. Some participants conceived fursonas to embody outlooks obtained after specific life events. For example, one participant, SY, noted the following about his second fursona RK:

“RK is more of a steely stern avenger type. Not as so happy go lucky as S and he comes from, sort of my need for justice out there in the world. Came with the idea for him after I saw a girl being chased around by two creeps in a party. Said they were gonna put her in a blender or something, whatever that means. So, I got between her and the creeps and said “Hey, back off,” they got the hint pretty quickly. So I designed RK to be sort of the avenger of the innocent and stuff like that.”

I argue that the RK fursona is an entity that acts within a polysemic sphere. The fursona at once negotiates private aspects, such as SY’s desire for justice, and bridges those negotiations into public spheres via performances.

Performance as Space Making

Papacharissi draws on Schechner in examining the roles of performance and play in identity formation across digital spaces. She paraphrases his idea that performances through play are "a way to publicly explore thoughts that previously occupied the realm of private fantasy" (Papacharissi, 2015). I argue that the performance of fursonas practices a similar exploration into private fantasy and engages in a form of space making. I argue that the space created by the performance of fursonas is akin to Oldenburg's (1982) "third place," a place in between work and home. Oldenburg envisions third places as spaces capable of generating "an experience of mutual concern and appreciation for people who are ostensibly different from oneself." These experiences are reflected in the ways that fursonas are performed through embodiment. Maase (2015) argues that fursuiting passively engages in a form of facade performance that "enables the ability to act as it gains the attentions of the outsider turning them into unwilling spectator." Fursuiting entails a form of physical embodiment that creates a facade performance, other forms of embodiment such as roleplay, gestural play, and persona projection onto media constitute more overt forms of performance (Figure 7). In these performances spectators and performers are enveloped in a space where fantasies of transformation, anthropomorphism, and zoomorphism are played out. A third place is generated where in alternative practices of identity and embodiment become apparent to spectators and participants.

The generation of a third place coincides with the construction of what Suits would term as illusory rules. More accurately, fursuiting deconstructs the conventionally quaint

illusory rules of social conduct and replaces them with rules of character play and embodiment. One participant described the liberating properties of fursuits thusly:

“[T]here are personalities that are not yourself and since you’re behind a mask, there’s a sense of, a very significant amount of freedom for expression and interaction that just isn’t possible when people recognize who you are without a mask”

The suit’s dissolution of “normal” illusory rules permits for alternative social practices to emerge. In particular, the call to costuming and performance taps into Johnstone’s ideas on possession, wherein the wearer of a performance apparatuses becomes possessed by the personality imbued upon the apparatus. These possessions were not limited to the performances of full suits. For example, in my personal experiences using my cat puppet, I opted for the puppet to adopt the persona of a cat. The puppet’s personality was mischievous, naïve, and playful, with tendency to mew and proclaim the epistemological idiom “I am cat.” I chose these traits based on the appearance of the puppet: a rotund, fluffy ginger kitten with a permanent wide-eyed stare. Though some furries opted not to interact with my puppetry, those who did generally played along with the persona the puppet emitted. Many commented on the cuteness of the puppet and played along with the cat’s naivete and innocence. In effect, the performance created a space wherein others and myself were capable of recognizing my “possession” by the cat puppet.

The creation of space was not limited to the performances of routines and skits by fursuits. Space was also created within aesthetic performances of furies not in suit. While many attendees to the furmeets did not wear fursuits, there were many furies who wore accessories associated with the fandom. Tails, ears, keychains, badges and other paraphernalia were not uncommon among attendees. One striking example occurred at *Tail!* An attendee had come to the event wearing a handkerchief draped around their face and a sign around their neck that read “first furmeet, hugs welcome.” Despite lacking any other paraphernalia, the attendee opted to only communicate with gestures.

I analyze these aesthetic performances through Holland et al’s “figured worlds” theory. A figured world is a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized,” (Holland et al., 1998). These worlds possess artifacts through which figured worlds become “evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful.” The artifacts worn by non fursuiters creates a space, a figured world of furies, wherein they become recognized as actors participating in the consumption and production of zoomorphic performances. Translating this to my personal experience, I found myself more readily performing to furmeet attendees that wore furry paraphernalia. This was particularly more pronounced at *Tail!*, a public space where the mingling of furies and nonfuries was frequent.

Agential Realism

The furry subculture presents a space where boundary making and mattering as doing are realized. Fursonas can vary in terms of their composition, with some possessing outlandish fictional histories while others may be more approximate analogs to their users

(Maase, 2015). The relationship between the fursona and the self cannot be sufficiently defined as a binary system. Through intra-actions between the phenomena of personal histories, fictional histories, and aesthetics, the boundaries between the self and the fursona are simultaneously contextualized and blurred. Both personas, the self and the fursona, are placed within a continuum of relations between these phenomena and gain meaning through these intra-actions as a whole rather than through a static, binary reflection of each other.

The act of fursuiting enmeshes itself with an even broader scope of intra-actions, with a greater focus on visceral perceptions. While fursonas may be purely virtual, fursuits occupy physical space, engaging in intra-actions of sight, hearing feel, smell, and space. Through this agency the suit gains matter. For example, participants noted the ability of fursuits to create a liminal space for both user and spectator. One participant that will be referred to as TR, noted the following:

"When you're dealing with fursuiting for example, you can interact with them a lot, I wouldn't say a lot, but you can interact with them a little differently than you would with in real life. For example, if I knew this person in the fursuit was my friend and I maybe grabbed onto their tail from behind and started laughing about it people would say 'ah that's cute' and start taking pictures. Now if I just went up to somebody and grabbed their leg, it would kind of be a slightly different story."

In TR's example the intra-acting phenomena of physicality of form, play, and

behavioral norms, are performed by the presence of the fursuit. These performances create a liminal space, which is a congealing of agency between participants, the fursuiter, TR, and the spectators. The suit thus becomes matter and acquires meaning through the intra-actions between the phenomena it engages with.

It is important to consider how these realizations of fursuiting and fursonas as matter plays into observations of bodies. Much like her position on matter, Barad positions the body as a performed phenomenon. She argues that "the seemingly self-evidentiary nature of bodily boundaries, including their seeming visual self-evidence, is a result of the repetition of (culturally and historically) specific bodily performances" (p. 155). The fursona and fursuiting both participate in repeated bodily performances. Fursonas may be performed aesthetically such as by adopting appearance of the fursona on virtual media services (Figure 5) and the use of avatars in online spaces (Figure 6). These aesthetic performances appeal to bodily intra-actions of the visual, constructing a solidarity of appearance for the persona. Fursonas may also be performed socially through roleplay and repeatedly engaging in intra-actions of the personalities and histories encoded in the persona's profile (Seabrook 2012, Maase 2015). One participant noted the effect of such encodings in their interactions with their own character, AR, and other characters.

"I mean, like I roleplay as my character and even act as a different person even if just because now that they're a different person, they're a different character. So it's the same thing with other people [...] Like there's a lot of things you can't get through human interaction that you can get through roleplay or online interaction. Like AR gives really interesting hugs cause she's eight feet tall and I

am not eight feet tall so I don't give those kinds of hugs."

In this example, the interactions of the physical bodies, the physical identities of the roleplayers, is superseded by social intra-actions of the characters and their characteristics. The roleplayer acted around the body of the character both socially and "physically" in the case of AR's hugs. In addressing other roleplayers, AR circumvented the physical body of the roleplayers and instead focused on the socially constructed body. Thus, the performances of the fursona draws away from pure physical intra-actions of embodiment and draws attention to the psychological artifacts composing the concepts of the body.

Conversely, fursuiting's boundary making practices involve enhancing the physicalities of performances. In examining the physicality of fursuiting, it is useful to consider Barad's insights on prosthetic enhancements in relation to the body. Barad argues that the breakdown of the "able-bodied" narrative allows reflection on "the entangled nature of phenomena and the importance of the agential cut and their corollary constitutive exclusions" (p. 158). Following on her criticism of matter preexisting, Barad argues against the inherent givenness of bodies and posits the self-evidence of bodily objects as psychological artifacts. The apparent failure of these artifacts through the literal failures of the flesh enable deconstructions of the boundaries and relations of the body. Fursuits invert these arguments by drawing attention to bodily objects through enhancement. Prosthetic enhancements interrogate boundaries between the imaginary and the real, highlighting the agential cuts between the artificial, the natural, and idealizations of form. One participant noted a discomfort with the ways in which fursuits invaded these conventional boundaries:

"I feel that fullsuiting or suiting to some extent sort of erases or supersedes the original person's personality and replaces them with something else. I'm not really about that, I'm okay with who I am as a human being and I understand a lot of suiters are as well and I'm not trying to diss them. I'm trying to say for me, I'm not trying to replace my identity. I'm not really, I'm more about augmenting my identity."

I build upon Maase (2012), fursuits are simultaneously prosthetic enhancements and invasions that in their performance "invade the public space and are façade performances that bring the private and the animal into the human world allowing for that border between animal and human, sacred and profane to blur in absurd antics." These performances make clear the assumptions placed upon human bodies and as Barad puts it, how "the very practices by which the differential bodies of the human and the nonhuman are drawn are always already implicated in particular materializations (p. 153).

Sympoiesis

I argue that, much like apparatuses and models, fursonas act as meaning making mediums, particularly as mediums for exploring concepts of self and identity. I propose that both Haraway's holistic approach of sympoiesis and Barad's more boundary focused agential approach are applicable in examining how fursonas engage in meaning making within identities. For example, one of the participants, JT, described experiences wherein the fursona sympoietically weaves histories, temporalities, places, the real, and the

imaginary. JT explained his relationship with his fursonas as follows:

"I would say that naturally there's a blend, there's an element there of who I try to be. Not in like a physical sense, it would be generally wrong, but I mean in a ideals and a moral standpoint [...] but [my fursona] also reflects a large part of who I believe I am today."

When questioned further, JT noted his fursona as an augmentation of identity rather than a substitute and elaborated on the fictional history of his fursona as an extraterrestrial being from a phantasmal planet. When asked about the relationship between his fursona and the worldbuilding, JT stated the following:

"I would say that specifically, features of the world itself again kinda reflect how I feel as a person. [...] So, one example is that the planet itself is kind of is fractured with two different regions in it. One is like fiery and one is ice. [...] So, at least in my case I feel like I have an internal dichotomy too. Which is like sometimes I just feel like a lot more driven and intense to get things done. More focused on things, I'd say that's more like the intense part of the planet. And then other times I'm just kinda rolling with things and enjoying whatever like the other side."

In JT's case, the fursona, its imagined world, idealizations of self, and representations of self coexist in an unbounded web of relations. In contrast, fursonas may

also adopt an agential realist approach to meaning making within identities. SY is a participant who possesses multiple fursonas: Foxy, RK, and Jean-Pierre. Foxy, is SY's primary fursona who is described as a playful anthropomorphic fox that was originally designed as cartoon character for advertising purposes. SY later adopted Foxy as his persona in the furry community and proactively suits and performs as the character. When asked about his other two fursonas and their relationship with Foxy, SY noted the following:

"RK is more of a steely stern avenger type. Not as so happy go lucky as Foxy and he comes from, sort of my need for justice out there in the world. [...] Jean-Pierre is sort of a different character entirely. Jean-Pierre wasn't entirely created by me. Jean-Pierre was, truth be told, given to me as part of an adoptables auction. [...] Jean-Pierre I see as more of an innocent type, just a very shy, very skittish and always willing to try new things. [...] RK and Jean-Pierre, they're sorta parts of my personality that maybe I'd like to manifest a little more. With Foxy, he's the part of my personality I want to be there. RK and Jean-Pierre, they're the ones that are already within me as it were."

SY's account portrays the creation of boundaries amongst individual fursonas, each representing a set of qualities attributed to SY's identity. The fursona Foxy is bounded by intra-actions between representations of self, performance, and community history. RK's boundaries are formed through intra-actions with mentalities of justice and idealizations of self. Jean-Pierre's boundaries are formed from intra-actions with

intra-personal histories and ideas of innocence.

While SY's and JT's experiences differ in how the fursona is realized as a meaning making medium, I am not claiming that sympoiesis and agential realism are mutually exclusive systems of analyzing relationality. Barad's framing examines how intra-actions form boundaries and allow the performance of matter. Haraway's framing observes how intra-actions defy boundaries and create a holistic, sympoietically bound ecosystem of relations. These framings are coexisting systems that interplay off concepts of intra-action on differing scales. Agential realism operates on a performative approach and the "congealing of agency," while sympoiesis operates on a composting of relations into interwoven ecosystems.

Precarity, Assemblages, and Contamination

In the case of fursuiting, Tsing's concept of precarity is addressed in the transience of physical form and mannerisms. Fursuits introduce an instability of in how physical form is perceived and create a liminal performative space that highlight the contaminated histories of the assumptions of the body, human-animal relationships, the fursona, and the space of the performance.

Fursonas also interact strongly with contamination and assemblages, particularly adoptable fursonas. Adoptable fursonas are characters that are designed by one party, but the rights, name, and likeness are given or sold to another party. One participant, AR, possesses an adoptable fursona, Dan, along with his own user created fursona, Sarah. AR owns a suit of Dan given to him from the fursona's previous owner. When asked on his fursuiting approach with Dan, AR noted the following:

"People don't know me as Dan, except when I'm in costume. So it's a lot different of a medium for me to act in. Cause Dan is sort of a generic looking dog character and I can use that to just be a generic-ish dog. And I can focus on just my looks and just on being cute and adorable to entertain people, rather than, people would know Sarah as the character from interactions in Second Life or Lang or whathaveyou."

Even with the intention of creating a "generic" personality for Dan, AR's fursuiting experience is rife with contamination, both human and otherwise. There are the nonhuman histories of canine behavior which manifest in AR's performance, the human histories of anonymity and autonomy bound within Dan's status as an adoptable fursona. These contaminations create an unwitting collaboration between suit, performer, and spectator which in turn contaminates the space of the performance, creating a liminal sphere of play.

The layers of contamination contained in the assemblages surrounding the fursona complicate its role as a persona and as a character. Tsing notes that the "evolution of our 'selves' is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaborations" (p. 29). The fursona is no exception to this, it is in constant negotiations of histories in its design, representation, and performance. On a design level, fursonas merge the human and the animal, both concepts inexorably bound to histories of the human versus the nonhuman. On a representational level, fursonas can at once be fantastic, idealized, and relatable as users embed histories of the personal and imaginary into them. Performance wise, fursonas inherit histories of community and

practice, becoming creators of a space of play. In interacting in these varied capacities, the fursona becomes “a 'boundary object,' that is, a shared concern that yet takes on many meanings and leads in varied directions” (p. 94). Each direction available to the fursona is laden with a unique set of contaminations between the user, the fursona, and everything in between.

Despite the layers of histories that contaminate any entity, Tsing notes that these histories are in fact “condensations in the indeterminate here and now” (p. 50). Similar condensations of histories can be seen within the furry fandom. One particular set of examples are the stereotypes surrounding the species of a fursona. One participant noted the following concerning the perception of species within the fandom:

“There are preconceived notions in the fandom and I'm pretty sure a lot of people know what I'm talking about and I don't necessarily hold all these views but, for example, a common one is if you are a fox, you are a lot more promiscuous. If you are a wolf then you are a lot more assertive and dominant and very self-pride and all that stuff [...] Why does someone choose for the fursona to be A versus B? It could be people seeing stereotypes of A or they see whatever about A so they gravitate towards A and they reinforce what A is because they're okay with that, they want that.”

These stereotypes are condensations of performative experiences, both personal and interpersonal. Displays of dominance, promiscuity, and other traits, performed or otherwise, are experienced across furmeets, convention spaces, and digital domains. These

displays intersect with the histories of communities, personalities and worldbuilding. The species is a way in which these intersections collapse and condense, the layers of contamination becoming embodied in the form of an animal.

This embodiment of histories and relata is how Tsing's perspective of relationality differs from Barad. Rather than emphasizing on how an entity may be composed of its relations as Barad does, Tsing instead argues for how relata may transform and govern entities. Tsing posits that contaminations "change who we are as we make way for others" (p. 27). By contrast, Barad's account is that entities, or matter in her case, are realized through performance of intra-acting phenomena. However, Tsing questions "how might a gathering become a 'happening'" (p. 28) and proposes that assemblages are the embodiment performances of these intra-actions. When framed in the language of precarity, these embodied performances are the transformation of entities brought about through the contamination by histories.

Tsing's embodied approach parallels some of Haraway's insights. Haraway's framing of sympoiesis echoes the idea of contamination, noting that humans "know, think, world, and tell stories through with other stories worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings" (p. 97). However, while the sympoietic perspective is sympathetic to the idea of contaminations there is a disconnect in how entities are framed in the two accounts. Haraway follows an ecologically inspired model wherein each entity inhabits a larger ecosystem, filling a niche in a web of ever expansive intra-actions. By contrast, entities in Tsing's model embody these ecosystems through involuntary collaboration due to contamination by histories.

CONCLUSION

My objective for this project was to observe ways in which identity was mediated across spaces in respect to the phenomena of the fursona and fursuiting. To this end, I engaged into an ethnography of the furry community. I constructed and performed an alternate persona through a cat puppet to support my ethnographic efforts. My ethnographic insights were paired with participant interviews, observational data, and critical literary analysis to construct three primary conclusions: the creation of virtual affordance within the physical world, the use of artifacts as sociable, space making objects, and the power of artifacts to represent, create and transfer personal or community identities.

My first finding argues that the furry subculture offers insight into translating affordances of the virtual into nonvirtual spaces. The phantasmal nature of fursuits at once, sustains the existence of the imagined while anchoring these imaginaries within the real. Similarly, the use of the fursona as an idealization or representation of the self, behaviorally embodies the virtual within the real. I argue that these practices demonstrate that the affordances of virtuality are not exclusive to the realms of virtual and digital worlds. The presence of these affordances in the digital are in fact reenactments of performances and space making as achieved through negotiations of artifice, the real, and the imaginary.

My second argument revolves around the role of artifacts in the creation of space and sociality. Artifacts such as fursuits and paraphernalia create alternative social spaces. These objects evoke cultural and social worlds and control the acceptable

communicative practices and membership to these worlds. These artifacts thus become media. They mediate communication by defining the recognizable participants and practices within a space. Through the creation of these meaning making spaces, artifacts enhance sociality by permitting the recognition and use of alternative social practices.

Lastly, my final finding opens a discourse on crowd constructions of identity and meaning making practices as embodied in physical and nonphysical artifacts. The fursona and fursuiting participates in communal construction of identity and representation through the integration of shared histories and performances. The fursona and fursuit condense these elements into practices and artifacts of personal and communal identity. At once, they serve creators of communal space whilst adopting markers of individual expression. The fursona and fursuit thus provide meaning making practices that may be figuratively and literally transferred between individuals and groups.

These findings are limited by the scope of my research project. The participant observations and interviews were drawn primarily from the southern California furry community. Furthermore, limited time was given to observing the practices of this community in online contexts. Thus, this project represents only a small portion of the opportunities that this subculture may provide for reimagining conceptions of identity, space making, and the nuanced socio-technical practices of meaning making systems. In future work, I hope to examine more specific interactions between identity and artifacts. , are the relationships between the commercial aspects of fursonas, such as adoptables, and the ways in which identity is imagined communally amongst makers

and users. I have also yet to more thoroughly examine the role of fursuits and costumes as interface. Fursuits and costumes provide mediums through which users may interact with others in physical space, yet still visually and spatially separate the users from others through aesthetics and performance. The nuances of these mediated interactions beg further examination. These future endeavors, alongside the endeavors of other scholars, delve into a rich, untapped landscape ripe with insights into the self, the real, the virtual, and artifice.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Agential Realism: A posthumanist theory in which Karen Barad posits that matter is realized through the performative intra-actions between phenomena.

Anthropomorphism: The application of human traits onto nonhuman entities

Contamination: Posthumanist scholar Ana Tsing posits that all entities are affected by histories of entities that came before them. All entities are thus contaminated with said histories and participate in involuntary cooperation.

Deviantart: A general online art hosting site that possesses a strong furry presence.

Furaffinity: The largest online furry art hosting site on the internet. Also, considered an online hub for the furry community.

Furmeet: Also known as a “meet.” An in-person gathering of furies. These gatherings range from small and personal to sprawling and public.

Furry: A diverse subculture that possess a shared interest in anthropomorphism and zoomorphism; May also be used to refer to members of said subculture.

Fursona: Also known as a “sona.” A furry persona, typically represented as an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic entity.

Fursuit: Also known as a “suit.” Donning a mascot like costume in the likeness of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic entity. The act of using a fursuit is known as “fursuiting” or “suiting.”

Graymuzzle: An emic term meant to refer to older members of the fandom. May be used to refer to community members who are advanced in age, as well as community members from the founding era of the fandom in 1960s and 1970s.

Prancing Skiltaire (PS): A popular monthly furmeet held in the home of two founding members of the fandom.

Sympoiesis: Donna Haraway characterizes sympoiesis as state of the entities coexisting in an ecological web of interacting phenomena.

Tail!: A popular monthly furmeet held at gay bar in Long Beach.

Zoomorphism: The application of animal traits onto the human.

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