The Furry Journal

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Welcome! *(or Welcome Back)*

Before you—in one form or another—is the first issue of a new "furry/funny animal" publication. It's also a reincarnation of an earlier newsletter, *Furbytes,* that was distributed solely in electronic form (hence the silly name). Like its predecessor, **TFJ**'s focus will be on news and criticism of anthropomorphic (or "funny") animal press and fan activities.

While **TFJ** continues the *Furbytes* electronic distribution, it is not (and *Furbytes* was not) an "electronic magazine"; it is a conventional newsletter, designed to be printed. Each issue will be distributed in two forms. One will be ASCII text, which can be read on screen or printed (the ASCII files, unlike *Furbytes*, do not contain page breaks, so you might want to load the file into a word processor or use a printing utility to add page numbers and top/bottom margins—the LP utility with Norton Utilities PC, for example). Another will be a Postscript file which, when sent to a Postscript-compatible printer, will produce a formatted, "typeset" version of the newsletter.

Why distribute the newsletter this way? Simply put: it's easier. There are no mailing or printing costs associated with electronic distribution. If you want to print out multiple copies and give them to people, feel free. If you want to offer a subscription to **TFJ** yourself, feel free. (Before doing this, please read the distribution restrictions on the last page, though.)

Furbytes only lasted three issues; by the third issue, I had become too caught up in both schoolwork and a far more ambitious publication, *Mythagoras,* and while I promised to eventually bring the newsletter back, it never quite seemed to happen. So why is **TFJ** happening after all this time?

There's no one main reason, but there's a few contributing factors. One, both *Mythagoras* and its semi-successor, *Zoomorphica,* are—as far as I know—history. Yes, you'd think that being the co-editor of the first and the sole editor of the second, I'd know absolutely, but for convoluted and arcane reasons, this isn't the case. That magazine, under one name or another, never seems to quite die, and there's a good chance it'll be back in one form or another—although it certainly will not do so with me as the publisher.

The second reason is that, as the first reason implies, I don't want to do publishing anymore. I enjoy editing, and enjoy writing even more, but I don't enjoy being in business, even to the extent that producing a fanzine would require. This may change in the future, but for right now, I know I'm better off working on my own stories and articles, and publishing them in other people's magazines. But there's just not that many out there—few for stories, and almost none for furry articles, reviews, and criticism. **TFJ** represents a kind of happy copout: I can get the articles seen (and even publish other people's articles!), still come up with something that looks reasonably professional, and not deal with *any* of the business side of publishing because I don't *have* a business side.

Third, I don't think there's anything else like this in furry fandom, and the fandom really needs something like it. There's been other attempts at nonfiction publications, ranging from Ray Rooney's "Furtherance" to Ken Fletcher & Taral Wayne's "Plush." As far as I know, the only one that still survives is "In-fur-nation," and it does so primarily because it's part of the quarterly ConFurence progress report. While it's entertaining, it's the fandom equlvalent of *USA Today*—more headlines than articles.

One of the ideas behind "Plush" was that furry fandom needed a publication more like the 'zines in other areas of fandom: small, unpretentious newsletters that were *about* the fandom, not just elements of it—what a literary critic (God save us) might call a "metazine." I don't know that **TFJ** will serve this purpose, but I'd like it to try.

This first issue may not be a good example of future ones; for one thing, what follows consists entirely of my own opinions about a few issues in furry fandom. In future issues, I'd like to include articles by other people. (There's a possibility of printing short fiction, poetry, and the like, but it won't ever be a major part of the zine.) Letters of comment sent (via E-Mail or normal post box mail) may be printed and responded to. And, I'd like to build up a reference list of furry "marketplaces"—comic book companies, distributors, and dealers who carry material that I think will be interesting to you.

Beyond that, who knows what time will bring? Looking over what I have in this first issue, there's bound to be something to stir some discussion (read: I think there's some potentially inflammatory stuff here). Whatever comments you have, don't hesitate to send them along to me.

Fandom, Furries & Standards

The first issue of *Furbytes,* as well as the first issue of *Mythagoras,* contained an article on what the definition of "furry" was. A future issue of **TFJ** may include the Furry Fan Dictionary that I started some time ago, which will probably be a nauseatingly complete answer to that question. Well, most of you probably already have an idea of what "furry" is: if you didn't, you probably wouldn't have had enough interest to get this far. What follows isn't intended to help newcomers, but more to serve as some background and observations (and my own assertions) about furry fandom as it exists currently.

Most of the publications, parties, cons and other "fanacs" in furrydom are concerned solely with being furry—as long as it's got foxes and cats, the quality and content are secondary. This is not to say that there aren't good fanzines, and there have been a few noteworthy exceptions that set out precisely to have high editorial standards. It's my feeling that *Mythagoras* started that ball rolling. Take that as arrogance if you will, but before that, the idea of a magazine that'd look at home on the shelves of your neighborhood Waldenbooks, right down to the four-color cover and the snazzy interior layout, just wasn't there.

Paradoxically, *Mythagoras* might have also been the furfan equivalent to *The Watchmen* in its effects. A lot of superhero comics after *Watchmen* captured the style without the substance; since *Mythagoras,* the idea of color covers and (almost?) professional layout has become relatively common, but the content hasn't markedly improved. Again, there are exceptions; very recently, there have been some publications that surpass *Mythagoras'* production value, and at least one of these (*Steam Victorian*) matches or exceeds the quality standard *Mythagoras #3* tried to hold for interior work. And *Yarf!*, furdom's best-known fanzine, almost always manages to be at least above average. (Someone needs to say that; most of what I hear about *Yarf!* is critical—which is, I suspect, the downside of being furdom's best-known fanzine.)

But there's also been a lot of dreck. Everyone with access to a photocopier has produced their own "portfolio," and more than I'd have possibly imagined have produced, with wildly mixed results, their own magazines.

—But wait! you say. Can't you judge the health of the fandom by the activity in it? Isn't it good for people to be producing these things, whether or not they're good? And who's to say what's really "good?" Isn't it a matter of personal opinion?

Well, yes. Any time you pass aesthetic judgment on something, you're expressing a personal opinion. And the final "judge" of these new publications is the fan marketplace. If you don't think the fan marketplace is very discriminating, well, that's just your opinion, and so that's fine.

But is it *really* fine?

This whole line of thought came up when I mentioned editorial standards on FurryMUCK, the Internet-based furry social club/role-playing game/free long distance service. The discussion had turned to what was and wasn't appropriate for "public areas" on FurryMUCK (places where a new user to the system would be likely to find themselves and view what's going on). I offered the opinion that all places need to have editorial standards; someone I was talking to said, "I hate editorial standards."

Well, this comment got me a-thinkin'.

I know what he meant: he didn't like the idea of being told what you can and can't say. Nobody does. I don't. But that's not what an editorial standard *is.* He's not alone in this misconception. When a fan mag rejects something, or some fans start hearing criticism about the quality or content of artwork, they get offended. They say everyone should be able to print what they want. They're absolutely right. Then they go on to say that when something *doesn't* get printed, it's censorship. They're dead wrong..

Few (if any) people have called for censorship in furfan publishing. There are people who don't like violence or sex, and who complain about the prevalence of one or the other or both in furry art and comics. But this isn't censorship. They might even try to publish their own magazine and reject anything that doesn't meet their standards for "family entertainment" (or whatever). Hey, guys—this still isn't censorship. If they go into your house and burn your collection of *Furnography,* or successfully prevent the publication of *Nude Vixens for Drooling Fanboys* (don't ask me how), you'd have a case.

Furthermore, content isn't the only editorial standard. It's just the one that gets the most attention in furfan circles, since the dreary "sex or no sex" battle refuses to die (and those of you keen to blame it all on the prudes. news flash: to a lot of us, Hugh Hefner is just as irritating as Jerry Falwell). Quality and content can't be truly separated. But given a choice between focusing on one or the other, furfans usually choose to focus on content: a fanzine that doesn't publish explicit stories, or one that's only looking for hardcore sex, or one that's only looking for things about specific characters or a specific species, or one that publishes anything as long as it has somebody with fur in a pivotal role. Doesn't placing content over quality strike anyone else as backwards?

To put this less delicately than "Plush" did: there should be a publication that's willing to stand up, point at something in dire need of deletion, and say, "Sorry, guys, but this sucks lemons."

Yes, there are a lot of objections people can come up to doing that. The suck factor of anything is in the eye of the beholder. But honestly, do you think science fiction and, more recently, comics, have really been hurt by critical attention? In the mid-'80s I remember a lot of focus on the quality of comics. Now, the focus has shifted away from storytelling toward collectible value, hot properties and "new" superhero universes—away from quality and toward content. Now, we have more titles than we did five years ago, but there are fewer *good* titles, fewer *unique* titles, and the ones that are out there are harder than ever to find.

Being critical isn't going to hurt furry fandom. It has the potential to bruise egos, perhaps especially in our fandom (as *Plush* observed, many furry artists react petulantly or even violently to criticism). But it might also have the potential to encourage creators to try to create artwork, comics and stories that aren't merely furry, but are *good.*

Proboys Raise a Stink

Praising the virtues of being critical makes an appropriate lead-in to some commentary on MU's one-shot comic, "Skunk." This is one of two books that appeared at about the same time that claim to "poke fun" at furrydom, the other being Antarctic Press's "Tank Vixens." "Tank Vixens" was originally announced as "Lesbian Foxes in Hovertanks," from MU, to be illustrated by Tom Verre. Paul Kidd, the book's writer, felt that Verre left the project, at least in part, *because* it had generated positive interest among the fandom, rather than being seen as a vicious attack. While several acquaintances of Verre have presented other reasons for his withdrawal, his contribution of cover art to "Skunk" lends credibility to Kidd's supposition. Whatever qualities "Skunk" lacks, viciousness is not one of them.

"Skunk" consists of four stories. The first is a piece by Roberta Gregory, about a fan who dreams of furry women who have their way with him, and then tell him he can't have any humans. He wakes up when a neighbor hears him screaming and knocks on his door, but he mutters something misanthropic and ignores her, she decides he's a weird recluse and leaves, and Ms. Gregory ends with a caption about how Mother Nature works to keep inferior genes from breeding. The second is by Donna Barr, a vignette about a horse-woman who is changed into a Red Shetland-type by the insistence of fanboys, who are portrayed as a cult worshiping "Saint Dizknee" and using the magic of their "holy black books." The third is a wordless piece by Chuck Melville, the first few pages of which are a male nude furry cavorting with nude female furries. Tthis is revealed to be an electronic persona of a man using a bulletin board. He is a fat, sad-looking man, alone in a dark house, who calls another system as soon as his time elapses on the first, the implication being that he has no life other than this electronic fantasy. The fourth, by Colin Upton, is an attack on Jim Groat's behavior at the Angouleme Comic Festival in France. It also features one panel in which someone refers to "Ted" (presumably Edd Vick, MU's publisher) only publishing stuff that appeals to immature fanboy "skunkfuckers." This term is where the title "Skunk" comes from.

Some of the stories are technically well done—Melville's is well drawn, and Barr's even succeeds at being funny. It's also the silliest and least mean-spirited of the bunch; Barr shows exasperation with fanboys, but not hatred. A fan might read it and think, "I've met people like that," or even "I've been that person," but probably not, "The person who wrote this has no respect for me." That reaction seems to have been exactly the intention of the book overall—to belittle furry fans. If *Tank Vixens* pokes fun at furrydom the way a good comedian might, "Skunk" goes after its throat in a way only diehard fans of Howard Stern and Morton Downey, Jr. might appreciate.

The problem with criticizing something like "Skunk" is, of course, that the title's defenders (and creators) can accuse any and all critics of being crying fanboys. Can't you take a joke? If it bothers you that much, it might be because it hits a little too close to home, huh? Besides, the book is by a furry publisher, so it can't be meant as badly as you're taking it, right?

Maybe they have some valid points. Maybe a lot of fans are too preoccupied with sex and fantasy pinup girls. Maybe some of them use electronic services in lieu of a life. Maybe I shouldn't travel to France with Jim Groat. And maybe MU did intend this just to "poke fun" at fans. But—

The person who wrote this has no respect for me. Just as you can make a distinction between "fans" and "fanboys," you can make a distinction between "pros" and "proboys." A "proboy" is someone who doesn't understand that there's more to being professional than having the talent. Furry "prodom" has a lot of proboys, who consider all fans to be fanboys until proven otherwise—to be among the clueless morons portrayed in "Skunk."

I like the works of at least two of the creators in other places, and like one of the creators personally (the only one I've met). I can assume they did not mean this to be taken personally by fans, but if this is the case, it only changes the focus from their apparent maliciousness to their apparent obliviousness. Could the folks at MU honestly not see the difference between stories like *Tank Vixens,* a spoof with scattered Jay Leno-like potshots at furdom's quirks, and sneering, holier-than-thou abuse that borders on the personal? Upton's story—which can *only* be seen as a personal attack—can only cast the book in a darker light: maybe they *did* see it.

I've tried to view "Skunk" as a criticism of the fandom, but it's so—well—proboyish about it that it can't even succeed there. It has no high aspirations like *Plush,* does not suggest raising the field's quality like *Steam Victorian,* and doesn't even show a sense of humor like *Tank Vixens*. And if it was meant to tell fanboys to "get a life,