

# Feature



## Running an Animal Mascot Business *Eric Stevens\**

*Building a fursuit takes special skills, and many in the Furry fandom work with a fursuit maker rather than building their own. A professional mascot builder talks about what it takes to run a successful business creating mascots and fursuits.*

Ever since joining with the Furry fandom in 1999, I'd thought of making a living in costuming. Thirteen years later, my dream became a reality.

Early on in my experience with science-fiction fandom, I admired the fantasy aspect and those who could create their own fictional characters based on their admiration of other's works and life experiences. Furry fans aren't so very different from general science fiction fans.

Instead of obsessing around "Star Trek", "Star Wars" or the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, we create characters based on humanized or anthropomorphic animals. Examples of anthropomorphic attributes include exhibiting human intelligence and

facial expressions, the ability to speak, walk on two legs, and wear clothing.

We create stories and art around these characters and gather together to share our passion. The Furry fandom is made up of some extremely creative people. Artists, writers, photographers, filkers and costumers make up about 75% of all members.

It was in 2000 that I attended my first Furry gathering in St. Louis (below). There were 20-25 of us at the picnic including 4-5 costumers. Given an opportunity to try on a tiger costume, or fursuit as we call them, I found it to be a very freeing experience. It was an opportunity to escape life, release inhibitions and perform for others. Immediately, I was hooked.



St. Louis Furry Campout – Picture used with permission "Raccoon Photography"

At that time, out of all 'Furry' fans, 10-12% of those attending gatherings and conventions had full costumes. Those numbers are determined from a 'Fursuit Parade' where folks line up and parade through the halls of the hotel and then are counted. Now in 2013, the number has jumped to 20-25% of attendees wearing costumes. In 2012, Anthrocon, the largest of all Furry conventions counted 5179 attendees with 1044 participating in the fursuit parade. At an average of 5 yards of faux fur material used per full costume, that's about 4200 yards of fur material in one area. We are definitely helping out the textile business.

Upon returning home from that first picnic, I found a costume maker in California who would make my first custom costume for me. It was a black tiger and cost me all of \$450.00. I wore it to gatherings and a convention or two and desired a second costume.

Money being tight, in 2001 I decided to attempt creating a costume on my own. Never having sewn before, I found the internet to be full of tutorials created by other Furry fans and costumers. I bought a used sewing machine and turned a section of my apartment into a work area (next page).



Above: My first work area in 2001; Below: Velkrotiger". Photos by Eric Stevens.



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"Tsumi" a partial fursuit – Photo by Eric Stevens.

In designing a white tiger with black Velcro stripes, so I could add and remove striping in various colors and materials, I ordered some fur and started on my experiment. After much trial and error, and breaking two sewing machines, within four months "Velcrotiger" was born (left).

Making fursuits became a hobby for me. Fursuits can be full costumes or 'partials' which consist of a head, hands, feet and tail (above). The partials are easier to wear and do not overheat the wearer as quickly. People often wear an additional costume with the fursuit partial, like Jedi

robes, dresses or fighting armor. Costumes I made in that time were learning tools, each one better than the last. In hindsight, a sewing class would have been extremely helpful but tripping over my own feet seemed to work.

Years went by, then in 2009 I started making custom costumes for others. Because my main focus was cats, I registered the name and website ByCats4Cats.com. At the time I was at PayPal.com working in their seller fraud division and making 3-4 costumes a year.

Because the furry fandom has a plethora of talented artists, those wanting a fursuit would have art commissions made of their character. Most of the art features a front, side and back pose (below). From the art, I would research faux fur materials and formulate a price quote. At that time, I charged \$1000.00 for a full costume. Each costume took anywhere from 90-115 hours to complete. It was definitely a labor of love because after materials, I was lucky to make \$6 an hour.



"Catstomizer" reference sheet – Used with permission, Art template created by "Electrocat Artworks, South Africa" Chanelle Snyman for use by ByCats4Cats.com.

On-the-side costume making continued until March of 2012 when I went part-time at PayPal so I could begin the journey to making costuming my full time business. I removed the bed from the main bedroom of my apartment, placed it in the dining room and set up shop (above, right). Getting fur fibers out of the carpet in there was not a chore I'd wish on anyone.

The majority of costumes I make are fitted to the wearer as they are usually the only ones wearing it. Most body pieces are nothing more than a standard jumpsuit pattern. Some costumes have more of a detailed shape where a standard pattern can't be used. When a deposit is made on a full costume, needing measurements, the customer has two choices: they can provide measurements from a list I give them, or make a duct tape dummy of themselves.

For the most part, measurements are all I need. As long as the customer has a buddy that can help them out accurately, they can get a well fitted body suit. With '[Pattern Master](#)' from Wild Ginger Software, I can plug measurements into my computer and print out a custom pattern. I then hand draw the markings and design onto the pattern and am good to go.

Body design can also include muscle or leg padding to stray away from the general human body shape. For this a duct tape dummy from ankles to neck comes in very handy. In stuffing the dummy with polyfill, you then have the customer's shape laying on the table. Foam can be glued to the dummy then a pattern can be made from it. It also doubles as a cool way to display the finished project.



My second work area – Photo by Eric Stevens

When beginning to work full time, my costumes had a base price of \$1200.00 and two per month were being completed. I was putting in 40-50 hours a week and took as many days off at PayPal as I could. In August of 2012, I left PayPal and moved to Minneapolis, MN into a small Rambler style house. Its 950 sq. ft. basement is my work area. Having laminate wood floors down there after dealing with carpet for four years



My third work area – Photo by Eric Stevens.

was like heaven! Now I have a separate area for cutting fur, airbrushing highlights, cutting foam, a wash basin and tons of storage. Scratch and dent doors from the hardware store make for the best worktops. Three of them and \$3 later my work area was taking shape.

Its amazing how the Furry fandom has grown. I blame the internet for this. As technology became more and more obtainable in the mid to late 1990's an influx of new fans came out of the woodwork. Newly assimilated fans were seeking others to share their passion and met with whoever they could find. Furry conventions usually start out as smaller local gatherings.

As attendance grows, local groups may decide to host a convention, where there are educational panels, dealers to purchase items from, artists who take on-the-spot commissions for character art, and writing workshops. There are also larger events like masquerade contests, and a variety show and dances (below).



Cedar Rapids Furry Group, New Years Eve – Photo by Eric Stevens.

Because conventions are so popular and numbers of costumers are increasing, the market for those wanting and making costumes has exploded. People are picking up costume creation for the first time. There are so many tutorials in text and video form out there on the internet. Those with motivation can easily learn skills, where to get materials and ask for help to make their very own fursuit.

Faux fur is made of acrylic fibers woven into a cotton backing. It then goes through an ‘electrofying’ process that polishes the fibers by combing the fabric with a heated, grooved cylinder in both directions. The fur is then coated with resins or silicone to give it a certain feel or sheen. Sometimes mistakes are made in the production process where the heated cylinder gets too hot thus ‘burning’ the fibers. The fibers slightly melt under the heat causing a wavy or choppy effect in the material. Watch out for major retailers selling the material at a discount of 50% or more. I spent \$450 on a large order of this discount fur, and it all arrived ‘burnt’ and could not be returned.

Fur quality is determined first by how tightly the backing is woven then second by its denseness. The looser the backing, the



My current work area – Photo by Eric Stevens.

less dense the fibers are. If you hold the fur up to the light and it can be seen through, that material may not be a good choice from which to complete a full costume. Looser woven backings will fail and can tear over time... no matter how well the seams are sewn. Fur comes in many lengths and patterns. [DistinctiveFabric.com](http://DistinctiveFabric.com) is one of the best suppliers.

We are limited when looking for solid spectrum colors. ‘Fun fur’ comes in many colors in a .5” length and also a 3” length. At \$13-\$18/yard I only use it if absolutely necessary. The backing is thin and the fibers are not very dense. Solid colors are also available in a 1.5-2” pile height ranging from \$21-\$25/yard. The backing is very durable, the fibers are dense, but they are very thin and wispy causing the fur to appear matted at times. Brushing the fur does straighten the fibers, but within 5 minutes, its back to looking matted.

Because of these limitations for solid colors, the majority of fursuits needing bright colors are made from the 2". Now if you need earth tone furs, you are in luck. Some of the best earth tone furs come from [Monterey Mills](#) out of Janesville, Wisconsin. They sell fur by the roll at 12-15 yards per roll. The only major retailer who sells Monterey Mills fur by the yard is [CR's Crafts](#) located in Leland, Iowa. There you will find 1" 'Teddy' or 'Cubby' in white, black and every shade of brown you can imagine ranging from \$14-\$22/yard. They also supply a Monterey Mills 'Fox' fur. At \$29/yard it's the most dense white, black, 'palamino' and rust color you will find.

Most of the time, when presented with character art, the customer has to settle for certain shades of material that do not match their character only because of what we are limited to. Fur can not be dyed because although the cotton backing will, the dye does not adhere to the acrylic fibers.

There are also businesses such as [DreamVisionCreations.org](#) who focus on making parts for fursuits. They make everything from the noses (right), claws and eyes, up to full head structures that only need the fur and details added. It's amazing to see people as young as 14 years old creating and showing off their works with pride. Everyone has their own style. Some make realistic looking



Noses by DreamVisionCreations.org.

animals, some are more mascot and cartoon-like.

Because there are so many up-and-coming fursuit makers, you would think competition would be an issue: that is not the case. Those with a refined style can and will stay busy. Some of the top fursuit makers are treated like rock stars, fetching \$3000 or more per costume. Some of their customers will wait over two years.

I complete 4-5 projects a month at 70-80 hours worked per week. In saving every pattern from every costume for even the tiniest of foam and fur pieces, I've reduced my work time from 90-115 hours to 50-80 hours each. My prices have increased as well, ranging from \$1800 to \$2700. Tigers (above) and leopards take the most time because each stripe and spot is sewn in.

Some people choose to airbrush the fur, painting in whichever color is needed which does not last over time. In the future, I'd like to hire someone part time to at least complete the body parts for me. Currently, my costumes are found worldwide including Japan, Italy, Germany, Australia, England and Canada. This



"Mieze" Full tiger costume – Photo by Eric Stevens.

year I will attend eight conventions where I meet old and new clients.

Watching people enjoy themselves in my work never gets old. All in all, through self-education, honing my skills and learning to run a successful business, things couldn't be better. My desire to make costumes a full time business has come to fruition. With hard work and dedication, dreams can come true.

**Eric Stevens** ("Snap E. Tiger") operates [ByCats4Cats.com](#) in White Bear Lake Minnesota. His main focus is cat costumes, but he will make other animals as well. Eric has been making furry animal costumes or 'fursuits' since 2001 and his work is found all over the world. Being ingrained with the Furry Fandom, he has been seen on TLC (The Learning Channel), Animal Planet, Omaha, NE news stations and in various print articles.