

Japan Conquers America: The Mainstreaming of Anime

The Japanese really won World War Two, having staged one of the most successful invasions in history. This was a silent incursion, one that slipped below the noses of both the American military and the American censors, unnoticed until it was too late. This was the invasion of Japanese culture, the most profound and massive cultural exchange since the British invasion of the 1960's. Leading the vanguard of this wave of culture and media from the land of the rising sun is anime, Japanese animation. From its humble roots in Japan in the 1950's, anime has grown to become a worldwide sensation, appearing at the Oscars, on the big screen, and during primetime television. Yet how has a fundamentally Japanese medium, designed for Japanese viewers, become so popular in America, changing from nothing to niche to mainstream? The answer to this question has been more than 45 years in the making, starting on the NBC television network in 1963.

Inroads, Failure, and Fandom in the United States

It was the story of a young man fighting against injustice, battling for freedom, equality, and peace. It had long plot arcs and detailed characterization, truly making the characters seem alive. What was so surprising about this was that the young man was a robot, the show was from Japan dubbed into English, and most importantly, it was animated. This was the show Astroboy, the first anime to ever appear in the United States. Airing for over 100 episodes, it gave the United States its first taste of Japanese animation. Throughout the sixties, anime was immensely popular in the United States.

By the early 70's, however, with more risqué and violent shows like Cutey Honey and Mazinger Z appearing and the sanitization of cartoons across the United States, the market for anime dried up. Any shows that did make it to the United States had all the Japanese content removed, effectively lobotomized. By the mid 1970's, anime was just cartoons with a weird drawing style, as American as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny. Yet in these dark days there was one thing that saved anime from remaining a Japanese only phenomenon; the VCR.

The first anime club in the United States was founded in 1977, an offshoot of a Los Angeles science fiction club. Watching anime on tapes recorded from local Japanese community stations, these early *otaku* were attracted to anime because of its gritty and real nature. Unlike American cartoons where no one would die and the status quo was always maintained, anime had violence, blood, and death, even if it was not always shown explicitly on screen. The characters were more complex, the ideas less sugar coated, plots and emotion easy to understand even without subtitles. By the late 1970's, anime clubs were already sending recordings to each other across the nation, trading tapes via mail. Fans were even corresponding with fellow fans in Japan, American *otaku* sending their Japanese counterparts tapes of Battlestar Galactica and other shows in exchange for anime recorded in Japan. Anime in American during the 1980's spread through word of mouth between friends and in-room showings at science fiction cons while the fandom kept itself alive through un-translated video tapes, filling the void left by the anime production companies themselves, having abandoned the American market. Yet by the late 80's, the fandom had begun to collapse, infighting and politicking beginning to fracture tape sharing. It was only the advent of fansubbing, or putting in

English subtitles on anime episodes, done for the love of anime, and the rise of exclusively anime conventions that held the fandom together.

As seen above, the early days of anime fandom were characterized by an almost complete lack of support from anime producers. Fansubbing and video sharing came about because these early American anime fans lacked any form of contact with both the producers, and to a degree, the producerly texts. Yet despite this, American *otaku* still gathered, gathering at anime conventions, paying for them out of pocket. Beyond video sharing and fansubbing, American *otaku* found other ways to indulge their fandoms. Some produced professional quality magazines for publication in homage to the major Japanese anime magazines like Newtype and Animage. Several dedicated anime fans even moved to Japan to get closer to their obsession, as lovingly and mockingly portrayed in one of the interviews in Otaku no Video. Yet time rolled on, by 1995 anime videos were beginning to be released by licensed distributors in the United States, and though the Americas were beginning to receive attention from producers, things were still very much the same in the American *otaku* community. There were still fansubs being created, and anime conventions held, the hobby still only a minor, but quickly growing, part of the massive web of traditionally nerd fandoms. Yet in 1998, everything changed.

From Niche to Mainstream, and the State of Anime Today

1998 was the year of the electric rat. This pint sized rodent, colored gold, red, and black, was at the vanguard of what brought anime into the public eye, instantly turning it into a household name. Pokemon, both the video game and the animated series brought the public's eye to bear on Japanese animation. In an instant this small fandom became a

sensation, “Japanimation” the hot thing. From 1998 to 2001 the attendance at Otakon, one of the largest anime conventions in America quadrupled, from 2,500 in 1998 to over 10,000 four years later. In that same period, Cartoon Network aired 20 different anime series during their very popular Toonami bloc. Anime, once unknown in the United States jumped to prominence overnight. Japanese culture, once shunned in American anime, was viewed as integral. It is an anime world now, though one much different from that of the early 1990’s, let alone the 1980’s.

Ask a seven year old boy in 2008 what his favorite show is and there is a good chance he will say Naruto or Pokemon. Anime today is so pervasive, its influences spreading out throughout much of Western culture. The mainstream appeal of anime is in its wacky plots, its insane stunts and feats of motion, its intense action, and its unique and very cute drawing style. Not only is anime nearly ubiquitous on children’s television, but American animators are also now duplicating the style in their own works. Shows such as Teen Titans and Avatar: The Last Airbender take almost everything but Japan from anime; facial expressions, plotting, storyline, drawing style. Even venerable toy manufacturer Lego has joined this craze, producing anime-themed mecha Lego sets. Yet despite the mainstreaming of anime, the fandom itself has seemed to stagnate. There are more anime shows than ever on Cartoon Network, but attendance at Otakon was only up less than 2.5% from last year. The mainstream appeal of anime seems to be limitless, yet the fandom for it seems to have petered out. The fans and enthusiasts have been all brought into the fold, the casual consumers still possessing a near limitless market, a harbinger for what is to come for anime; a sharp divide between the mainstream consumers and the fans.

The Future of Anime

Will dressing up in a Sailor Moon costume ever be considered normal? Probably not. Like the way Star Trek is now, references abound, yet people dressing up, Trekkies, are considered strange. Anime will become part of American culture, infusing itself into conversation and knowledge, yet, like other things, other fandoms that have attained that place in pop culture, its fans will be considered weird for what they do. Dressing up is not going to be normal, no matter how much more mainstream anime gets. There will be people who like it, those are considered normal, and there will be those that are fans, considered weird, unusual, and nerdy. People will like anime in increasing amounts in the United States, yet only the core fans, those American *otaku*, will make it part of their self identity. This is where the future of anime lies, widespread knowledge of it, widespread and mainstream approval of it, familiarity even; yet fandom will continue to be, like all fandoms, considered outside of normality. As anime becomes more mainstream, its fandom and people that like it become more mainstream, like the fandoms and interests of Star Wars, Star Trek, and Lord of the Rings.

Number of anime shown during Cartoon Networks' Toonami Block, played during Saturday nights and weekday afternoons from 4-6PM, lower part is the number of shows

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
	1	3	2	6	9	4	10	5	7	5	11	11

Change in growth and attendance at Otakon, a very large anime convention, from 1994-2007

Memberships Growth

2007 22,852 +2.4%

2006¹ 22,302 +1%

2005¹ 22,000 +5%

2004 20,899 +21%

2003 17,338 +35%

2002 12,880 +25%

2001 10,275 +37%

2000 7,500 +67%

1999 4,500 +80%

1998 2,500 +43%

1997 1,750 +75%

1996 1,000 +122%

1995 450 +29%

1994 350 - 4 %

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