

Findings from Symposium on Anime in North America

Why is anime so popular in North America?

Abstract: What enabled anime to be one of the successful Japanese export industries this past decade? This report elaborates the following findings from SANA.

Anime has answered a need brought on by America's attitude that "cartoons are just for kids." It offers something for any age, and it respects its audience and their ability to think and to judge.

Anime is filled with characters to which we develop strong emotional ties, who are made more real by being set in rich, internally consistent worlds. These characters and worlds are depicted with artwork beautiful enough to attract fans in its own right, a worthy heir to millennia of Japanese study and appreciation of beauty.

Anime offers a wide variety of stories, from simple to complex and ongoing. These stories speak to us in themes universal to the human condition while still retaining an exotic appeal from their Japanese origins. This foreign taste pushes fans to learn and grow and accept, rather than to reject the unfamiliar.

Finally, anime builds communities, and not only among its American fans. It fosters understanding and friendship among people around the globe.

Introduction

Why is anime so popular in North America? This question is pertinent, though not always asked, as anime has been one of the few Japanese exports to continue growing during the recent economic downturn. A group of luminaries and fans gathered at SANA on March 23, 2013 to discuss this very topic.

SANA featured keynote presenters from both academia and industry. Dr. Alisa Freedman from University of Oregon and Dr. Ian Condry from MIT shared the results of their research. Sarah Sullivan and Christopher Bevins from FUNimation brought current industry perspective. Kevin McKeever from Harmony Gold contributed both business and fan insights from his long career in the industry. And Jerry Beck shared his life-long passion: starting in childhood, continuing as the first commercial distributor of anime features in the U.S. through his current study and work.

Among the audience were winners of an essay contest. The question put to the people was "Why do you like anime? What draws you to it?" Their answers quoted herein, help us to see the effect of anime and its wide reaching influence on the world.

These shows are real. Real emotions, stories that make you feel. They're not just something to pass the time, they are something to get involved with, and then, remember.

Devan Daugette

A Place for Anime in the U.S.

There is something about the outlaw aspect of anime that...young people like in particular. I wanted to know more about who made these films...There was a reality to the fantasy of anime. They were treating the animated form in an adult way.

-Jerry Beck

When anime slowly started trickling into the US, there was a gaping hole in media when it came to animated movies and comics. The Comics Code Authority, originally created in 1954 for comic books had been effectively adopted by the TV networks, restricting animation to certain moral guidelines. These guidelines mirrored the popular morals of religious groups and the times: respect for authority, good must triumph over evil, violence is forbidden, and the paranormal discouraged. It relegated the art form of animation to something short of a public service announcement, and limited the creators of comics and animated art to unimaginative drudgery. As a result animation atrophied as an art form and was relegated to a second-class media option, deemed only suitable for children.

There is a common sentiment in the US that children do not have the attention span to deal with long stories over many episodes, nor can they handle adult themes. Both of these notions are untrue; take the world-famous Harry Potter series. When the first book of the series came out in the United States, many children's literature critics put them aside as too advanced in vocabulary, or too adult for children to understand. Now, they are the most popular children's books in modern history. Just because children do not have the ability to articulate their thoughts does not indicate a lack of taste or discrimination. This fallacy in American thought led to the stagnation of animation as a whole there. Consequently, when anime films did make it into the American market, oftentimes the stories would be butchered in order to make the film "appropriate" for children audiences. For example when *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* was brought to America in 1984 as *Warriors of the Wind*, the cutting room floor took 18% of the movie along with one of the major themes of the original, turning a nuanced environmental message into a simple war story.

The famous author J.R.R. Tolkien spoke about what happens to an art form when its audience is restricted to children. He spoke on the subject of fairy stories, but these sentiments apply equally to anime.

It is true that in recent times fairy-stories have usually been written or 'adapted' for children. But so may music be, or verse, or novels, or history, or scientific manuals. It is a dangerous process, even when it is necessary. It is indeed only saved from disaster by the fact that the arts and sciences are not as a whole relegated to the nursery; the nursery and schoolroom are merely given such tastes and glimpses of the adult thing as seem fit for them in adult opinion (often much mistaken). Any one of these things would, if left altogether in the nursery, become gravely impaired. So would a beautiful table, a good picture, or a useful machine (such as a microscope), be defaced or broken, if it were left long unregarded in a schoolroom. Fairy-stories banished in this way, cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined; indeed insofar as they have been so banished, they have been ruined.

In short, media tailored for children becomes a sermon or a teaching tool, not an art form or a piece of entertainment. Children, as well as adults, seem to have a built-in skepticism or aversion towards overt teaching and have plenty of practice resisting it from school. Such media loses the qualities of what denotes a respected art form, and is left to languish and be forgotten.

If it weren't for anime entering the U.S., it could be argued that animation would have stayed in the children's category of the TV and movie industry. To have a fully active and live art form, you need a range of judgment in both the creators of the art, as well as its audience. Luckily, anime was waiting there for the American audience which so richly deserved that fully active art form.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd grown too old for a genre originally aimed at adolescent boys... However, I've been pleased to discover my fears unfounded, with recent new releases like *Bakuman* and *Madoka* throwing aside old molds and showing we can expect to be entertained for many years to come.

- John Sherrill

Humble Beginnings and Anime Fans

The beginning of anime in America, as in most cultural phenomena, came from a desire to represent an old medium in a new way. Animation had been around for a while in the U.S. but a new generation had grown tired of the stagnant offerings that their parents watched. Something new was needed that could be produced or found and adapted easily. A few enterprising companies began to look outside of our shores for new ideas. What they found in the early anime already being produced in Japan was a complete product that could be easily adapted to American audiences.

This began with commercial broadcast of some shows such as *Astroboy* 'Tetsuwan Atom' or *Speed Racer* 'Mach Go Go Go' in the early 1970s, though few realized their Japanese origins. The advent of video tape enabled sharing of shows recorded from TV, either from satellite dish, via direct contact with friends in Japan, or directly importing media such as laser disks from Japan. Fans joined together in amateur anime clubs or university anime clubs as a means to meet with other people who shared the same interest in anime. These clubs would share bootleg copies of these tapes together with whatever translation they could make. Originally these translations were photocopied synopses written to give fans with minimal to no knowledge of Japanese an idea what was going on. Occasionally a dedicated fan would do a full translation. During the '90s, this was augmented by distribution of several films such as *Akira* or *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* to arthouse theatres. By the end of the decade technology had advanced sufficiently to enable fan-subbing, eliminating the need for clumsy paper crutches. These fan-subbers were first distributed via the same tape-trading channels until those were overtaken by the internet. The fans created a grassroots movement to distribute this media they were genuinely passionate about.

The lack of accessibility of anime to the American public had an interesting side effect. It created a bit of an underground movement. Most people hadn't heard of it, and when one anime fan found another, it was like discovering another pioneer in the wilderness. Anime was hard to find. You had to work to find it, and that made the experience of finding it more personally

valuable. Fans started trading tapes, and meeting to discuss the anime they had seen. Anime grew from being just an art form to consume into becoming a form of fans relating to one another and trading knowledge. A community of fans formed that were passionate about anime and had a strong urge to collect it, as well as to give back to the community.

This urge to collect is still present today, and is one of the hallmarks of a “true” anime fan. If you have the complete series, the box sets, all of the volumes, posters, action figures, etc., you are a collector. If you find a friend and bring them into the fandom and share anime, then you are a “true” anime fan. The grassroots movement of fansubbing created a genuine love of the subject matter. When it isn’t advertised or commercialised, anime can be seen for the movement it really is: a long term desire to see something truly different make its way to American shores.

When all is said and done, anime is a magnificent art form that acts as a portal to infinite worlds and ways of thought. It brings attention to the wonderful Japanese culture, forms different communities that are generally accepting, quirky, and otherwise, and creates connections to amazing artists through image, music, sound, design, fashion, and industry, all the while maintaining and transforming the integrity of what is known as this form of art. Anime is magic!

-Mandy Wong

Virtues of Anime to American Audiences

Several themes emerged from the keynote presentations and discussion at SANA, the thoughts of presenters and fans alike converging on similar paths. Because of the prevailing thoughts that animation is only for children, anime fans must constantly be defending the art form and why they enjoy it. Therefore they all have strong opinions about why anime is popular in the U.S. This is an overview of their observations.

1. Anime is Animation That Doesn’t Talk Down to its Audience

Anime as an artform has never been restricted to telling simple stories. Writers and producers of anime have had the good fortune of being able to tell the kind of story they wanted to and not worry about the controls and the restriction of only telling a story to children. This allowed for stories that touched on and asked questions about the very fabric of life, love, and the human condition. Topics as far reaching as religion and death and the basis of human drama were open to be talked about and presented in ways that people were never able to imagine. It was possible to extrapolate the nature of God himself using a metaphor filled with giant robots. No other medium had the power to bring such complex ideas and deconstruct them into manageable parts like anime could. It needs its viewers to be worldly and eloquent enough to know the topics at hand. No other animated art form showed the world how to do that.

2. Storytelling in the Japanese Way - Syndication vs. Ongoing Storyline

Each option yields a vastly different style of storytelling. Writing for syndication allows for every episode to be watched independently of each other, outside of sequence, with a single story being encapsulated into one episode. This eases the job of distributing masters to multiple venues for broadcast. However, these storylines are generally more shallow and the characters more one-sided. Ongoing storylines create an episodic cadence, allowing for greater characterization, deeper connection between characters, and a much more complex plotline. As anime is generally an ongoing storyline, sophisticated storylines with complex characters are the norm. A non-simplistic form of storytelling is marked as valuable by the American anime fan. The audience is expected to keep up with the story, and infer the parts that may not be fully explained. At times it forces the watcher to learn something about mythology or the culture, which is also an integral part of enjoying anime as an American.

I find Anime more relatable than a lot of American media. The characters are interesting, complex, and at least a little bit awkward. I can understand and usually relate to the characters motivations, even in the most extreme and outrageous situations.

-Erissa Nussbaum

3. A World Laid Out Before Us

Simply put, anime is a gateway into worlds where anything is possible.

-Mandy Wong

Anime has one additional benefit that other animation seems to lack most of the time. A typical American animation technique for story generation has been to have a story first and then to craft the world and characters to fit into that story. The characters have actions first then a stage to play it on later. What the viewer ends up seeing are the characters playing out a scenario and the background is just a backdrop; something to be ignored or paid no mind. One of the wonders of anime story telling technique is the world that the story lives in is developed right along with the characters. Therefore, every story tends to be unique because it happens in the the world that was created for. At the time of anime's introduction into the American scene, that was a very unconventional way of storytelling. An anime like Akira could only happen in NEOTokyo, and that kind of subtle but very important quality was a big part of the "X" factor that made anime so popular. Instead of giving the impression of chess pieces being moved around a board by the author, anime characters become "real people" who are relatable and could conceivably exists outside of the story.

One effect of having "relatable" characters with such depth is that fans tend to forge a much deeper emotional connection with anime than with American animation. This emotional bond keeps them coming back for more: the next episode, character goods, or discussion with a fellow-fan. For in fact, these emotional ties mean that fans have not just found a piece of entertainment, but in this character have found a *friend* they like and wish to spend more time with.

4. A Cultural Window

...my dad took a business trip to Tokyo when I was a child. He described how different it was from our society, but also told me of many aspects that were the same, and even though he didn't speak the language, he loved every second of it.

Jordan Haynes

Anime, being originally created in Japan for a Japanese audience, naturally reflects and incorporates Japanese culture. It is even present in shows set elsewhere, such as futuristic outer space or some distant fantasy land. In shows set in modern or historical Japan, the culture is more obvious, as it is in those shows using Japanese myths as a basis for or elements of their story. Even where the culture is only a flavoring, the background and aesthetic sensibility it provides can be felt, drawing in fans. It provides an "exotic" factor that heightens their interest and draws them to "something new and different." This synthesis of familiar and universal themes and characters with a different culture and way of thinking provide a fresh and entertaining experience that cannot be found in "stories about the girl next door."

Anime also allows fans to learn about Japanese history and culture without having to use textbook or travel, and in a more entertaining and less expensive method. And by the very virtue of learning something about another culture, it pulls its fans from their narrow parochialism and gives them a view of—and a sense of belonging to—a wider, richer, more diverse world. All learning comes from experience, and the experience anime gives of "another culture" can only yield a richer, wiser audience.

5. A Handcrafted Collaborative Art Form

The roots of anime stem from the deep art style and history of Japan. Artists and creators have been exposed to thousands of years of a cultural art style that has influenced all parts of Japanese life and tradition. This has been one of many influences that has shaped the unique form of the animated world in Japan. Artists and creators see themselves as the audience as well as the creators, giving them the unique position of being able to make something that they love. American animation hasn't had the same type of history behind it and has been constantly saddled with the assumption that it had to be made for children; it's creators forced to make the art goofy and easy.

Anime studios use a team based approach to art and story development in almost every major release. Shows and movies are developed by rooms of people all striving to bring a singular world into being. Having many minds create the world, the characters, and the story allows for very deep and multifaceted creations, which in turn create interesting and unique stories for American anime fans. The testing and development of the worlds and stories is also helped along with the printed manga format. Due to their release system of short chapters in large printed manga anthologies, stories and scenarios can be tested out and refined cheaply and easily. Manga and light novels have been a testing ground for much of the great anime that has made it to theaters and TV screens worldwide. Anime has the benefit of having a designed developmental cycle. Teams create worlds that generate the stories which are tested on a real-

world audience and developed further if found to be popular. That allows it to be one of the few popular art forms that can say that the financial bottom line is not always the main concern in its creation. While anime production companies are concerned with the bottom line, they also count income from secondary markets such as games, figures, posters, DVDs, and the like. This leads them to focus on the wider popularity, appeal, and artistic merit of a show rather than the narrow, "will advertisers buy spots on this show," that seems to dominate American television. When the bottom line is not the primary concern for an art, much more engaging and interesting creations are produced. This is part of the magic and interest anime has for the American audience.

Anime is more than just money and a business transaction. Anime has always had a deep intrinsic value for both the creators and the fans. While those funding anime production do care about profit, the creators are highly passionate about their art. The passion comes through because both the creators and the viewers are deeply invested in the beauty and quality of their work. Because such an emphasis is placed on an appreciation of beauty as an end in and of itself, the ultimate product must be seen as valuable enough to compete in the anime market in both quality and depth. American fans place a high value on the whole experience: both the community and learning about other cultures. The focus on art is primary in its creation. The people everywhere looked into this unfamiliar form, and saw a reflection of themselves in another country. It is a human art form that, because of its universal appeal across borders, has shown to be very good at breaking down barriers and building communities.

Value in a social world is different from value in a business world; we have been thinking too much of value in a business sense...There is a social value or a social reward that is important even when there are stacks and stacks of paper and huge amounts of work....Social dynamics and re-thinking of what value means is part of that story.

-Dr. Ian Condry

6. A Beautiful Medium: The Art of Anime

What initially drew me into the anime world was plot, artistic style, and the fact that it was something I wasn't used to seeing.

Caroline Hofmann

By its very nature, animation has different constraints on what can portray than live action does. Non-humans, dragons, giant robots and powerful magic are just as easy to depict as the boy next door mowing the lawn. And it is far easier to portray fantastical worlds and non-realistic settings in anime than to find a location or build a sound stage where such can be shot. In animation, it costs the same to blow up a planet as a car. Anime has taken full advantage of this flexibility to tell a broad range of stories, not merely those easily filmed by actors on a soundstage or location. American animation has this same freedom, but has not taken anywhere near as full an advantage of it as anime. It tends more toward surreal depictions (like Bugs Bunny or The Simpsons), whereas anime also uses it to create worlds of great wonder, awe and beauty (Princess Mononoke being a good example), but anime does not restrict itself

to such “fantastical” presentation. It also tells stories that could conceivably be filmed in live action (such as the countless shows set in school) and makes them work, often better. Why? By its very nature, animation must draw its characters and settings simplified from a fully realistic representation. The audience willingly cooperates to fill back in these details which have been abstracted away (whether they be facial features, clothing details, strands of hair or parts of a house). Naturally, the audience synthesises these details from their own experience, thus putting themselves into the characters and the world, making both feel more familiar and easy to relate to.

Anime has a range of artistic complexity from the simplicity of Doraemon to the lush, detailed worlds of Studio Ghibli films. Yet each has an underlying aesthetic that it should be good to look at. Much American animation neglects this, leaving the story alone to carry the aesthetic weight. Many fans have been drawn to anime by the “pretty pictures” (especially in the early days when untranslated Japanese was the only option). Perhaps some culture-specific aesthetic sense moved originators of animation in both countries to choose different trade-offs when adapting to the time and budget constraints of TV. The Japanese choices have resulted in more beautiful pictures, enough that art books are frequently published on various anime where these are much more rare for American animation. The creators also tend to respect anime as a unique medium for visual storytelling as opposed to a mere marketing tool or ploy to hook children into products.

7. Lessons From Watching Anime

There are so many examples of anime that people can find as coping mechanisms, anime that people can find instructive, or anime that people can argue with....one of the great things it does is opens up questions and leave a lot for exploration.

- Dr. Alisa Freedman

Like many other forms of media anime speaks to the desire for people to live out lives that they would not be able to otherwise. Stressful situations ranging from the first day of school all the way to the ending of the world can be experienced without the need to be physically present for either event. The characters, all of whom are instantly relatable and have personalities that you care about, pull the viewer into the story and helps them feel like a part of the journey. The viewer becomes part of the story, living through the events that take place. Some anime fans use it as a detached way to experiment with their own personalities as well as experience the world without taking part in it personally. The watcher can put themselves in the place of the protagonist, or personify themselves in the archetypes of the stories. It also allows them to vicariously experience things that would be too scary to experience in real life, and thus safely learn from them.

It is important to note that this would not be possible without a serious storyline. The creators of anime take their art and stories seriously, so the fans can take them seriously. It allows the fans to take the story as the creators meant them, and draw their own conclusions as to how to apply the lessons learned to real life, as opposed to being spoon-fed some pre-packaged lesson. Anime has the ability to expand the horizons of the people who watch it, culturally, philosophically, and otherwise.

8. The Community and its Influence on Fans

I began to learn about the existence of fan conventions and anime clubs where people traded tapes of TV shows and movies while enjoying each other's company knowing they had intelligent reactions to the animated works they were watching. Everyone around me was appreciating the art styles and stories (whether they were translated notes or educated guesses from the audience) and had good times. Anime became my primary focus for interacting with the world on many respects, especially as I worked in the fan convention scene for the last two decade organizing screenings and teaching myself what various people might enjoy.

-Darius Washington

Partly due to its roots in the early days when clubs and tape trading were the only way to obtain anime, its fans have tended to come together and form communities, possibly more than other fandoms. These communities have continued and maintained much of their original flavor and attitudes even after anime has become much easier to obtain through ordinary channels in America. The anime community has always tended toward inclusion, "We don't care what anime you love as long as you love it," being a motto. Different lifestyles, different orientations, different political opinions and even wildly divergent opinions on anime are all accepted as valid. Together with this broad-minded acceptance also comes a higher degree of education, as the acceptance brings with it willingness to listen to, test, and learn from other diverse ideas. In addition to the obvious roots in university clubs, anime fandom tends to self-select for fans who have a curiosity and desire to learn about (and from) the new and different. Thus many fans are not exclusively anime fans, participating in other fandoms such as science fiction, fantasy, costuming, etc.

Another aspect that has continued from the early anime communities is the prevalence of collecting among fans. Box sets, soundtracks, figures, manga, posters: fans will collect any and all of these, and more, about shows they love. In the community this is both taken as a sign of how much a fan loves the show and also as a sign of support for the original creators. Whether this arose from following the Japanese secondary market of anime goods, or from early American toy tie-ins does not matter; there is a continuing market for goods and material related to shows among anime fans. A look through the dealers room at an anime convention will quickly show this: anime media is only a fraction of the total available there, the balance being goods and artwork related to the various shows.

9. A Universal Appeal

Anime covers the universal themes of love, growing up, death, responsibility, and conflict. It reflects humanity, in all of its facets, both beautiful and grotesque. It shows that we have more in common than appears at first glance, beyond the color of our skin, religion, or country of origin. These human themes allow the international community to relate more fully to anime, and the lessons learned within become more universally applicable. Anime shows us another part of being human, of loving and living as a whole species, and the trials and pitfalls that can happen. It shows us that all peoples of all nationalities can have the same beautiful yet dangerous lives and that we all are much closer to one soul than the borders of our countries would have us believe. Because ethnicity is not as evident in anime, for the most part, viewers have an easier time imagining themselves as part of the storyline and can relate to the characters based on personality rather than nationality. These aspects create a universal appeal to fans who don't always feel a connection to western cartoons or comics due to lack of story depth or obvious ethnicities.

Anime is widely recognized as international, bringing people to a wider world which takes people out of the normal or accepted view of media in America. Because of its roots in Japanese culture, an international understanding has to be adopted in order to fully appreciate Anime. Something as simple as "why do they take off their shoes when entering a house" is an example of the kinds of topics that many American viewers have to go outside of the media to research and learn about. This has led to many people becoming new students of Japanese and other world cultures. A citizen to citizen connection transcends and creates international communication. Steps like these toward understanding another culture lead to greater global happiness and peace between cultures that can't be denied. Greater global understanding has been one of the major goals of humanity, and for its small part anime helps to open the minds and hearts of its Western fans to what it really means to be human.

It is important to note that the universal appeal of anime is an organic phenomena arising from uniquely Japanese sensibilities. It is the Japanese perspective and intangible exotic beauty in the making of the art that draws in audiences from around the globe. Purposefully catering to international audiences would dilute this unique strength of anime. Attempting to globalize the artform would be ultimately counterproductive.

Anime has done something amazing in this world; it has truly united people, of all religions, people, and cultures.

Michael Norberg

In Conclusion

Anime is a human medium; each person experiences it as a human, in a very personal way. It is the heart and soul of the story and its players that demonstrates the emotions which tie us all

together and form the bonds from which we draw strength. We would like to close this report with some personal observations from the essayists and the fans of anime. We could not think of a better way to illustrate what anime is to the fandom who appreciate it the most.

All fans hope that SANA's findings will prove useful and contribute to the betterment of this artform we love.

Its cultural impact is fascinating to me, how its views, messages, themes and music bring worlds together...Growing up, my parents used to say that anime allows even people who would normally be social outcasts to feel welcome.

-Rebecca Cressler

Anime in America has a very inclusive fan culture. I find it's less of a boys club than a lot of other "Geek Culture". People can be involved at any level and still be welcomed.

-Erissa Nussbaum

I have learned over the years, that animes attention to detail, complex narratives, and colorful & unique characters, is what still draws me to it to this very day... In my youth, I was a hateful, vile, racist child, Anime encouraged me look at the world in a different way, there are no races, we are all the same, I am now a better person for it.

-Michael Norberg

Growing up I was sometimes embarrassed about the things I liked because they weren't cool per societies standards but since anime I feel doors into new cultures and experiences have opened up for me.

-Amber Wheeler

The emotions conveyed in anime are more raw and visceral than what is typical or even possible in non-animated entertainment... but is instead an emotional investment in the story: regardless of what is going to happen next, regardless if the audience in fact knows what's going to happen next, they still want to experience it.

Nicole Mallette

Anime is much more than Japanese animation to me. It's a gateway into various places and times for example, feudal Japan, outer space or a world no person has ever heard of before.

Carla Guzman

If it hadn't been for anime, I wouldn't have ever thought I'd travel to the land of the rising sun. I probably wouldn't have gained any influences that I use in my pieces of work today... The beautiful and diverse styles of animation, characters and stories bring me back every time.

Carla Guzman

Anime generally seems willing to explore many more different genres than is Hollywood... You

can do anything in anime. To me, anime is Something Different...In Anime their environs are appealing. The story is inviting. To me, Anime is someplace I want to be in.

- John Sherrill

Why is anime so popular in North America? It is a beautiful art style...that provides compelling characters that we can identify with in an interesting story that grabs us, engages us, does not talk down to us, and brings us together to form communities.

-George Robbert