Japanese Anime on the Internet
The ways Creative Energy is Manifested in the localization Practices of Japanese Anime Fans

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The activity of translating Japanese anime by fans, fitting subtitles to a video file and sharing it online i.e., fansubbing, used to be commonplace throughout late 90s until the early 2000s, when it fell into obscurity mostly due to the emergence of streaming services and consequently lower demand on pirated anime video files. The more sever antipiracy laws that were subsequently introduced in the US and several European countries eventually deemed the practice too dangerous to be continued on the same scale as it used to. This article describes the procedure of editing and sharing anime videos among Western anime fans and uses this example to showcase the creative energy of Western anime fans. Simultaneously, it tackles the usage of the term 'creative energy', as most of the contemporary studies on Japanese anime direct it only towards the official creators' work and disregard it while describing the contribution of anime fan communities. The article also touches a difficult issue of originality, right to ownership and copyrights infringement that occurs during such activities as streaming and sharing videos online.

Keywords: Anime, Creative Energy, Globalization, Localization, Media Content, Participatory Culture

1. Anime and its Popularity in the West

Anime [1] or Japanese Animation stands for animated TV series and movies produced by different animation studios located in Japan. Most anime series are unrelated to each other, and their production is carried out by small, independent studios. However, certain animation techniques, character designs and plot tropes are common in the genre and this quality, among others, makes Japanese anime distinguishable and unique in the eyes of a viewer (Iwabuchi 2002). As a genre of animation, anime is being appreciated and enjoyed throughout the world, although many anime series are still only available in its home country of Japan.

Anime was first introduced to the Western World through the United States, thanks to the efforts of few passionate entrepreneurs and anime lovers. Anime presence in US is still strong with France, Great Britain and Spain following. Anime first appeared in US on TV channels, where it became popular, although, due to strong censorship and localization practices, not yet recognized as made in Japan and not yet associated with Japanese culture. Throughout the 90s it has become more and more recognizable as Japanese and its popularity grew even more (Otmazgin 2014). However, due to, among other reasons, fragmentation and financial limitations of Japanese anime industry, difficulties in communication between Japanese and American side and fears among entrepreneurs who had already made a few misjudged investments in anime, anime presence on TV in US stalled in late 2000s. It has become not profitable enough to risk the investment in broadcasting rights of

less known, shorter anime series[2]. Subsequently, TV broadcasting companies in US fell short of delivering many new anime series, leaving many dedicated fans unsatisfied and angry[3].

Since then, anime in the West has experienced its Renaissance as it is being watched online, provided by numerous streaming services. The cost of digitalization of anime and distribution of anime videos as content is a lot lower than doing so by traditional means.

Thanks to digitalization, a steady growth in both internet anime market shares and anime streaming services revenue can be observed since 2012[4]. New kind of anime series, e.g. Baki, A.I.C.O. -Incarnation-, DEVILMAN crybaby[5]. the, so called, original series dedicated only to a certain streaming services, began to emerge. Meanwhile, the smaller streaming services operating only in Japan, like AU's Animepass or UULA were forced to shut down in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Investing in original anime titles is a signature strategy of Netflix, whose presence in Japanese market is strong. However, other foreign services like Apple TV, HBO Max or Amazon prime are not so competitive in Japan as they are abroad and are still struggling to gain significant market share. Thanks to this shift in the market towards the streaming services and watching anime online, the situation of even small Japanese anime studios is looking better and better[6]. Before the advancements made in the field of information technology the situation of anime studios was difficult as many of them had no means to sell their products overseas. However, despite harsh financial conditions many anime studios managed to survive. Therefore, the dedication and love towards anime itself is often described as the force that pushes anime creators forward and allows them to survive in a very competitive market.

2. What is Creative Energy in Anime Industry

The creative energy as described by Ian Condry, is the energy that can be observed throughout the process of creation of an art or a commodity. The term creative energy does not necessarily have to refer to Japanese anime but can describe any creation process. Condry's usage of the term, however, does refer to anime and the energy that can be observed or 'felt' in the room among Japanese Animation studio staff; the energy or dedication towards the creation exhibited by each individual member of the team (Condry 2013). The energy during meetings, before the storyboard, demonstrates the passion, dedication and team spirit of the animation studio staff; the qualities that can explain why the Japanese anime industry is so competitive even despite its low wages, amount of workload and long working hours. Ian Condry in his research concludes that it is this passion towards anime itself; treating the job as a hobby - an almost fan-like behavior, that drives these people forward and keeps them in business in spite of the financial difficulties and uncertain future. Although not specifically calling it "creative energy" many different scholars, e.g., Otmazgin, Mihara etc. mention the passion and dedication of the people involved in anime production (Otmazgin 2014, Mihara 2013).

Some similarities can be drawn between the characteristic of Japanese animators and American entrepreneurs, who have first introduced anime to US, described by Otmazgin earlier. Clearly, the first attempts at introduction of anime series to the US market were caused more by the passion of

the American entrepreneurs towards anime, rather than financial gains such investment could offer. These people remembered anime series they used to watch as children, often during their brief stay in Japan and wanted to share their experiences with other fans in the US and beyond. This is the same kind of passion, that is typical to fans, and it is similar to the dedication towards anime exhibited by directors and animators described by Condry.

What observation can be drawn from these examples is, that creative energy that can be left throughout the anime creation process is therefore not evaluated by the might of the enterprise that stands before the anime industry, nor can it be described by the attractiveness of the animator's job. Rather, it is the passion towards the job that makes working in anime industry almost a hobby and a joyful experience, despite the difficulties and harsh conditions.

This article recognizes abovementioned researches and understands how important an insight into the creation process and logistics of anime industry they provide. Honoring the contribution of Condry, Mihara and Otmazgin, the article tackles the narrow usage of the term `creative energy' as it is directed towards the anime production side: anime studio staff and entrepreneurs. While the dedication and workload of the production site is unquestionable, it is relevant to also acknowledge the contribution to anime's popularity made by the consumers' side. Later, the article provides detailed examples of such consumers' contribution to anime world's popularity and attempts to prove that creative energy can be observed on much larger scale among the fans. It argues that by singlehandedly making and distributing anime as a digital content throughout the world, the fans have proved to be the indispensable factor in anime's popularity and accessibility outside Japan.

3. IT Development and its Influence on Active Engagement and Participatory Culture Phenomenon Exhibited by Anime Fandom in the West

Before the internet, in 80s and 90s, when first anime series were introduced onto American market there used to exist a strict line drawn between those who create/produce and those who consume cultural commodities. That is not to say that consumers at that time use to be less creative than they are now but rather, that their energy had far smaller outlet than it has presently (Jenkins 2006)[7]. Some consumers and fans poured their energy into popularizing the anime genre and as adults, they invested their financial capital in Japanese anime's localization and broadcasting rights in US. Most of the fans, however had no access to such wealth or their ambitions were not so high to dedicate their live to anime's world popularity. These anime fans were constricted to local communities and few events organized over the year, where they could gather and discuss their beloved heroes and plots. While very passionate, they were mostly invisible to the creators of big companies and tudios (Jenkins 2006).

The status quo has changed due to the popularity of the internet and advancements in information technology. The access to the internet and basic IT literacy was enough for the fans to create a platform and much larger, international online community. Fans, who used to watch anime on TV, could rewatch it online and engage in all sorts of creative work such as publishing fictional stories (fanfiction) or self-drawn pictures of characters (fanart), exchanging ideas about the newest episodes

and sharing predictions of the forthcoming plot. The content that had been originally created to be passively consumed, was being recreated, edited, and rearranged on multiply platforms in multiply formats. The cultural change that was catalyzed by the advent of the internet influenced many franchises and pop-culture commodities. Anime was and still is a prominent example of how the access to tools and to a platform can change fans' behavior from passive consumption to active engagement and disturb the media consumption culture throughout the world.

In the next part, the article introduces and explains in detail anime fansubbing; a unique media localization and distribution practice done voluntarily, motivated by courtesy towards new anime fans and will to contribute to anime society.

4. P2P Standard and the Emergence of Anime Fansub Groups

Until recently, gaining an access to an anime series unavailable domestically meant either purchasing an, often overpriced overseas edition of VHS or DVD or using unofficial methods like decoding a satellite signal of Japanese TV program or downloading a video file from the internet. Such methods to acquire an anime series would become unnecessary due to the ascendency of Netflix and other streaming services.

Before the Netflix, in the 70s, 80s and 90s however, Western anime fans were restricted to what few anime series they could find on TV or on VHS in Blockbuster – the major chain store specializing in rental service and resale of video games and films. What is more, anime series that appeared on TV where heavily edited and censored as the assumption within US media was that 'Japaneseness' of imported cartoon series will not be a desirable quality among American viewers (Mckevitt 2010).

While the selection of titles offered officially satisfied many, the most dedicated fans started to look for broader selection of anime titles by using the newly emerging World Wide Web. With an access to the internet many IT literate fans could easily acquire a movie or a TV series episode, which has been previously recorded in Japan. The Video files acquired through that means were in their original, Japanese form, uncut, often containing the middle-episode commercial brake, and not yet translated. This posed problems of localization – the process anime fans would take very seriously and professionally and that would become more than just a hobby but would influence whole global anime market (Lee 2011).

Anime fansubbing began in the analogue era when fans started to translate VHS recordings of anime series. The procedure involved creating multiply copies of the original VHS and therefore fans had to do with e.g., deteriorated quality of a picture. The technology was still insufficient for the subtitled anime VHS to challenge the official product. Only in early 2000s, thanks to the development of the internet and to offset poor domestic anime supply, dedicated fans took the matter in their own hands and a new form of anime chain of supply emerged – the P2P sharing services. P2P, which stands for 'Peer to Peer', is a common form of sharing data between two or more PC units connected with each other through the web. There are several standards that make such data exchange possible, the most common one being a torrent protocol. Before anime fansubbing became

popular, sharing files via torrents used to be mostly related to the procedure of acquiring an illegal copy of a video game, but in the late 90s anime fans discovered it was also a perfect way to distribute anime video files. Although illegal and in some countries closely monitored by the police, the method was vastly superior to TV broadcast and extremely popular among anime fans. Sharing anime via P2P meant on-demand access to a video, a style of consumption very similar to the style of watching content on streaming services, where shows are not scheduled but can be enjoyed at the viewer's leisure. A digitalized video file never loses its quality and never degenerates; therefore, can avoid a fate that eventually meets content recorded on VHSs and DVDs. What is more, many conservative anime fans appreciate the raw quality of an original video file which, recorded in Japan, contains uncut, uncensored version of an episode with the original Japanese voiceover[8]. Many fans prefer the raw quality of the anime videos; they consider them to be 'purer', closer to the original edition and therefore more valuable. Indeed, in the late 90s, when DVDs firs emerged as a medium for video content in the US, fans published a list of their 'demands' or 'rules to follow' when releasing new anime series on DVD and presented it to American publishing companies. The rules demanded e.g., no voiceover, no editing a video and roperly translated subtitles (Cubbison 2005). Obviously, such terms could not be met and fans who wanted to get the best experience from watching anime had to do the localization by themselves. Acquiring the original Japanese versions of an anime series, means however, additional labor; at the very least the subtitles must be added, a work most dedicated fans enjoy and welcome; many of whom singlehandedly cut the video and arranged subtitles. Such procedure is called fansubbing.

Fansubbing does not relate only to anime. There are many video files that need subtitles, such as popular movies, TV series etc. The DVD or VHS editions of movies and TV series available commercially are subbed by professionals, the illegally distributed video files on the internet are being subbed by fans. The most common method of subbing is so called soft subbing, which means creating a text file with subtitles order of appearance matching the picture. Such file contains only a text information and can be used with many versions of a video. The other, more demanding, and time-consuming method is so called hard subbing. It requires special tools and the whole video must be edited throughout the process. Through such procedure the subtitles are hardwired into the video and cannot be removed – hence the name. The original video file is being overwritten and a new file is created. Soft subbing is also a newer method, introduced with the emergence of new technologies. It allows to separate subtitles from the so called 'raw' video file and share them with others. Such subtitles can then be retranslated into other languages, edited for errors, and arranged to match different versions of video files (Mckevitt 2010).

It is difficult to determine what came first: the demand on anime fansubbing or the supply of fansubbed anime. However, the poor anime supply on TV and long waiting time between new seasons' broadcasts are some reasons for anime fan community to turn towards the distribution of anime on the internet. The demand on subbed anime started growing an eventually was so huge, people without any expertise in video editing, without a proper education on Japanese culture and with little knowledge of Japanese language, working voluntarily, started to form, so called subbgroups or fansub groups. Some famous fansub groups gained a devoted following among the

fans and formed a brand of themselves. Many signed anime episodes they subbed with their own names. The demand not only for quantity of anime series but also for quality, and most of all for the speed of new releases became relevant and multiply versions or editions of the same anime series were made by different fansub groups as the tensions within the community grew (Denison 2011).

There used to be many fansub groups, each with slightly different anime library and different quality of video files. The major ones specialized in anime subbing were Taka Subs, Dattebayo, Horriblesubtitles, Doki, CoalGirls etc. Despite the name, these groups did not restrict themselves only to creating subtitles but often included hints or explanations of scenes, words, or expressions typical to Japanese culture but not understood well or uncommon in the West. All anime theme songs, so called Opening Songs and Ending Songs were subbed in karaoke style. This karaoke subtitles were especially commonplace, to the point that Western viewers did not realize that the original Japanese edition does not include them. The popularity of karaoke subtitles can be even seen in a recent episode of *Rick and Morty* – a comedy series that parodies anime in one of the episodes.

The overall quality of video files prepared by fansub groups, picture resolution, selection of titles, meticulousness of the people involved in the localization was often vastly superior to what was offered by official means on TV or on DVDs (Lee 2011). Given the fact that fansub groups mostly worked voluntarily and many of their members were still in their teens, the creative energy and the time involved were profound. One could argue that, thanks to fansub groups, anime fans in the West were able to enjoy more sophisticated editions of anime series than their counterparts in Japan.

On the example of fansub groups there can be noticed how the community of consumers can express its passion towards the commodity by being actively involved in the creation process and therefore exhibit creative energy of their own. Until recently, before the internet, fans often had no tools and platform to be heard or to gather in huge numbers. Before the internet fan communities were often local and small, contained to the closest comic-bookstore, being able to meet and exchange ideas only during few and far between events such as Comicon or Comic Fare. The advent of the internet, however, has changed fans' behavior forever as it offered the platform and with the developments in information technology also tools that allowed more and more active participation in the creative process that not so long ago used to be restricted only to the professionals (Jenkins 2006). Anime fansub groups are the very example of such active and creative fandom. Although they do not create completely new content and do not influence the creative energy of anime producers, they are involved in the work on localization and in the work on quality. By doing so they create a new product: an edition of the Japanese anime episode dedicated to Western viewers.

The reactions on such dramatic change in consumers' behavior are mixed. Officially the act of distributing an anime video file without the permission of the owner is illegal and jeopardizes sales of the official product. The US companies have become stricter towards copyright infringement recently. In 2008, the major forum/social network/streaming service site for English speaking anime fans, Crunchyroll, released the statement that there will no longer be possible to post/share any fan created video and/or text file (fansubs) on the site.

"On January 8, Crunchyroll will stop accepting user-submitted videos and other content from

individuals, and only host videos approved by copyright holders" (Crunchyroll Forum 2008).

Many studios in Japan condemn the fansub groups behavior as well, claiming that it is counterproductive, and it robs the industry. There are, however, also those, who acknowledge the indispensable role the fansub groups have in distributing obscure anime titles and share the passion for Japanese Pop Culture throughout the world.

5. Official anime Localization and its Challenges: Current Business Model and Copyright Law

As it was stated previously in the article, during the 90s anime, although being a niche in the US, was already an established genre with a dedicated fan following. The demand on more anime titles grew, however the supply stalled, due to in part the logistics of localization, time, and workload it usually involves and fears among entrepreneurs and studios (Mckevit 2010, Otmazgin 2013). These woes persist even today and due to obscurity of Japanese language, lack of fluent interpreters and certain cultural differences on a business level between the US and Japan, it is still not easy to successfully localize and sell a Japanese pop culture commodity. Through the traditional methods and traditional business model, the process can take up to several years. By the time anime series is available in English there are already many new seasons on air in Japan and asking American fans to wait for the official release is proving to be asking for too much in the era where information is so easily accessible (Lee 2011). Anime fansubbers, on the other hand, can translate and release a video even on the next day after it was aired in Japan and they can stream it globally, bypassing DVD regions and copyright laws[9]. This behavior influences how and where Japanese anime is being consumed throughout the world. It is no longer a scarce commodity, restricted to TV program or DVDs but has become downloadable everywhere where the internet reaches and is being watched on a PC screen rather than on TV (Lee 2011).

In the meantime, the current business model of localizing and distributing a foreign media content starts showing its age and is becoming more and more incompatible with the contemporary consumers' behavior; in its current shape it cannot efficiently control consumers, who from their part, have become much more active and engaged in the creative part of the pop culture industry (Jenkins 2006). The change is in progress and the overall approach to fans is being reviewed by media companies. The good example is Disney, who has recently started to be more lenient towards fans' works, provided such works are published on its specific, designated websites and fora (Jenkins 2006). Other companies may be not so progressive in their approach, and to implement a new, working business model takes time and it is a matter of trials and errors. Therefore, the current status quo between media companies and fans remains mostly unchanged and every act that is considered 'piracy' is or should be persecuted. This is not however the case, as, the copyright law is not homogenous throughout the world. It is also especially convoluted and difficult to impose in Japan.

Japanese copyright law deserves the research of its own, so here there should be just stated, that the procedures of interaction with a foreign media, especially technicalities concerning the copyrights' ownership, remain mostly undetermined. Many studios and companies have copyrights'

policies of their own, the unwritten set of rules to follow when selling a media commodity internationally, and they act upon the rule of precedence. When it comes to the issue of piracy and unofficial usage, Japanese companies mostly take the so-called dismissive ignorance approach; they ignore the copyrights infringements because acting accordingly to the Japanese copyright law would mean too much workload and is often deemed unbeneficial (Leonard 2005).

6. The Future of International Anime Community

When we read on an old reddit[10] threat, updated more than 2 years ago, that nobody makes subtitles anymore because every major anime episode is already available on Crunchyroll, there can be no question that an era has ended. The era of anime fansubbers has come to an end; fansubbed anime videos are being replaced by an officially accessible selection of titles available on many streaming services such as Crunchyroll – the biggest, internationally accessible streaming service, dedicated until recently only to Japanese anime. The simplest and the most obvious explanation of why there are no fansubbers anymore is that there is no demand any more for video files which, what is more are illegal to possess. The culture of media consumption has also changed from storing files on PC' memory (hard drive) to streaming content directly from the cloud. Thanks to faster internet transfer speed and more data provided by communication companies there is less and less demand on downloadable content that takes up phone' or PC's memory.

7. Conclusion

The first attempts at digitalization of anime videos that the access to the internet and overall improvements in hardware and software technology brought about, although illegal and infringing the copyrights of the owner, allowed fans to form an active, highly ordered, and sophisticated community whose goal at first may have been to just enjoy anime unavailable to them by other means, but who consequently became a highly efficient localization and promotion machine.

Although, it is difficult to judge such behaviour, there is no mistake that the small studios in Japan with no budget to support any ambitions they may have had concerning the international market, thanks to the work of fansub groups, got a free promotion outside Japan and gained popularity in the West. Subsequently, the fans in the West got an access to multiply anime titles and they could experience a foreign popular culture, they would not have an access to by other means. This initial contact with Japanese culture, possible only thanks to the existence of anime video files on the internet, influenced many of them and played a role in building a connection with Japanese culture and long-lasting appreciation towards Japan and in the West.

The funsub groups are no longer as popular as they used to be in early 2000s. There are several reasons for it. The members who started the procedure were mostly teenagers in the 2000s and now, when they grew up, they no longer have so much time to spare on a hobby. The main reason, however, is lack of the demand on downloadable video files caused by the emergence of streaming services.

Although now in recession, the fansubbing culture phenomenon remains a prove of an enormous creative potential that lies in consumers' community. This creative potential and grass-roots energy that can mobilize seemingly disconnected and eparated people into spontaneously formed international localization workshop working 24/7, without any financial support, is a formidable force to be reckoned with in the world of popular media industry. It endangers and challenges the traditional business model by bypassing the copyrights and physical country borders and supplying a would-be customer with a free commodity; often as a sole provider of the media content it monopolizes the anime video market of many smaller countries. As of today, copyright law is not internationally homogenous and cannot enforce any significant restrictions onto those who are involved in anime fansubbing. We can assume, that the creative energy the consumers hold will only get more and more significant in the future and that it will lead to a major change in media content creation and distribution.

References

(1)　Anime in Japan refers to all kinds of animation and is not restricted only to these of Japanese origin. In the Western culture, however, the word Anime is associated with Japanese animation only and its meaning is narrower. This article focuses on Anime in Western culture and on Western Anime fans activities so here the Western interpretation of the term is being used.

(2)　Anime series in Japan are on average shorter in length and contain fewer episodes than American cartoons. This is dictated by many anime series' closed structure where the main plot that is told through each episode leads to an ending. In contrast, many American cartoons have no main plot and each episode is independent of any other e.g., Tom and Jerry (Otmazgin 2013).

(3)　Otmazgin's 2013 research, based on interviews with Anime entrepreneurs, breaks Anime introduction to the US market into three phases. The beginning phase of strong localization in 1960s, the phase of Anime heyday in the US in 1990s and the decline phase.

(4)　AJA, Japan Animation Report 2017 data

(5)　data as of 2021.09.14, Netflix US homesite: https://www.netflix.com

(6)　AJA, Japan Animation Report 2017 data. The time the data was gathered the 2020 report was not yet published, although the previews of 2020 report edition and graphs obtainable on the Association of Japanese Animations AJA show steady growth in international Anime sales and overall growth of international Anime market (aja.gr.jp)

(7)　In his book Convergence Culture, Jenkins mostly describes the situation of comic book fans such as Marvel and DC fans in late 1980s and 90s. However, due to the state of technology at that time the internet was not easily accessible to everyone equally, and all fans, regardless of the franchise they followed, had to comply with the same limitations. As the Marvel, DC, Star Trek etc. were popular, domestic franchises, many events throughout the States were dedicated to them. Anime was still a niche commodity and Anime following in the US was in its infancy, henceforth its omission of this genre in Convergence Culture.

(8)　Many Anime series broadcasted in the US and Europe must be edited in post-production to fit the broadcast timeframe, that is specific to each country. E.g., in Japan the most common runtime of an Anime episode is

roughly 23 minutes which is less than in US and Europe. In many countries there is no commercial break during the episode as well so many Anime series must have more screentime added to fit the designated broadcast time frame. The process of prolonging an Anime title by several minutes often includes adding some out of context screentime, material that was not originally created and has no influence on the plot of the episode but acts as so called 'filler' – a screentime that is designed to fill the time.

(9)　Copyright Law is not homogenous around the world. Only exception is EU (Leonard 2005).

(10)　Popular international forum, containing a great variety of threats and discussion panels, e.g., focusing on games, anime, K-pop, politics, history, Western TV shows etc.

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