Why Do Hackers Watch Anime?

HSSC 213: Cyberculture Final Project

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Introduction

To answer the question "why do hackers watch anime?," one has to know something about hackers and something about anime. Hackers are not too unfamiliar, because we have already studied them. Anime, on the other hand, appears to be new territory — though I will argue that many of its characteristics resemble those we have studied. There is one solid academic resource, however, and that is Susan Napier's *Anime*[1]. While not overly well received by the anime community and certainly not an authority on the subject, Napier's book contains valuable insight into some of the central genres and themes in Japanese animation. It also supplies a profile of the anime fan and some indications of why people choose to watch anime, the latter of which is critical to my arguments.

Before I even bother to explain *why* hackers watch anime, I should probably at least provide some indication that hackers *do* watch anime. The following data is taken directly from Napier's "Profile of the Anime Fan" ([1] 246-249):

- 76 to 85 percent of anime fans are male.

- Anime fans tend to be students.

- Most anime fans who are students major in either computer science or electrical engineering.

- Most anime fans who are *not* students are high-tech workers.

These statistics are from the period between September 1998 and January 1999, a relatively recent period in hacker history. In this time period, the term "hacker" refers not to Levy's hackers from the TMRC[2] but to those who carry on the tradition started by Levy's hackers — namely, CS and EE students and high-tech workers. If we allow that Napier's study is moderately statistically significant, it's hard not to conclude that hackers and anime fans have a disproportionately large intersection. It should be noted, however, that

according to the study a sector of anime fans is made up of artists and animators, i.e. not all anime fans are hackers.

Nonetheless there is definitely some connection between the two, and I hope I can shed some light on the reason for this connection. Hacker culture is complex, anime fan culture is complex, and therefore the reason hackers are engrossed by anime is also complex. I propose the following two-part explanation: First, anime-watching culture shares identity, values, and to some extent structure of community with hacker culture. For example, Levy's hacker ethic[2] and Winner's cyberlibertarianism[3] translate nicely into the context of the anime community. Second, many of the qualities of the art form itself are attractive to hackers. Examples of such qualities include settings in romanticized utopias, and themes which bring into question the role of the body.

Along the way, I will point out several parallels between the computer and anime, which will hopefully indicate that hackers are enticed by anime for many of the same reasons they are enticed by the computer.

Anime Fan Culture

Identity

Anime fans identify themselves as a non-mainstream group. In fact, this is self-stated as the greatest attraction to anime [1]; fans actually embrace their own alienation — or as Napier puts it their "Otherness." Further, the heroes in anime with which the fans often identify themselves are typically alienated from mass culture because of some gift or power that is beyond their control.

Going yet further with this idea, we arrive at elitism. Being fond of one's own alienation seems to imply elitism. According to [1], "Anime fans show [...] ambivalence toward the outer, non-fan world." They are constantly comparing anime to American animation and media in general, and constantly pointing out why anime is better. The following quote from a computer-geek website sums up the alienation/elitism of anime fans:

> Anyways, why would you want anime to become mainstream? Isn't half the fun being able to enjoy something that most people can't understand? [4]

How does this tie in with hacker identity? Levy's hackers are used to being alone, at least within a small group that understands hacking and its appeal. Ambivalence toward the outside world is clear: "why bother with stupid things like brown-nosing teachers and striving for grades?" [2]. And so is elitism: "[hackers see themselves as] holders of an esoteric knowledge, defenders of the purity of computation seen not as a means to an end but as an artist's material whose internal aesthetic must be protected" [5]. Hackers already identify themselves as "Other" and elitist; watching anime just supports this identity.

One final note on identity: Neuromancer and Bladerunner play on the notion that the Japanese are getting ahead technologically in the 80s. Although Napier argues that a fascination with the Japanese is an

effect of anime fandom as opposed to a cause, it is possible that via the cyberpunk image hackers are more comfortable identifying with the Japanese.

Values

Levy sums up hacker values in his chapter on the hacker ethic. The hacker ethic puts forth a few general rules that coincide with the anime community values.

- *Access should be unlimited and total.* According to Napier, "many particularly dislike the fact that anime is almost always dubbed before airing on American television." Total access would be the product exactly as it came from Japan, not a watered-down English version. Subtitled versions are preferred so that the viewer gets the total experience as it was intended.

- *All information should be free.* These call into mind the philosophy of Richard Stallman, as well as Winner's cyberlibertarianism[3]. Are anime fans the same way? Probably not to the same degree, but the element is definitely there. One of the appeals of anime is that it is not restricted by American norms, stereotypes, or political correctness. "There is a sense of freedom (of expression) which tends to lack in [the] American counterpart"[1]. Anime fans take pride in not charging for copying tapes, and much like the open source software movement those who are capable voluntarily subtitle the works and give them away.

- *Mistrust authority — promote decentralization* In the case of anime, authority and centralization must be represented by the commercial video industry, especially Disney. The attitude toward Disney is exactly that of mistrust; when the Disney version of Miyazaki's Spirited Away came out, comments such as "anything that Disney touches loses some of it's brilliance" abounded on the web. It's not just Disney either, but commercialism in general: "for the most part Fandom has always strived to be where the Industry isn't"[1].

- *Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.* Meritocracy is certainly a part of anime fan culture. The "imaginativeness of the narrative" is one of the main reasons fans give for watching anime. In the context of anime, the merit at stake is the merit of the art itself; the bogus criteria is American norms, stereotypes, and political correctness. This certainly ties in with how hackers and anime fans are elitist: they both see themselves as seeking the *real* truth.

Structure

Can anime fan community be compared to Rheingold's virtual communities? Not exactly. One aspect is similar: anime is based around fantasies in which the members of the community take part. In the WELL, participants have a particular persona which they emulate, and according to Rheingold it is often closer to

their true personality. In anime communities, participants relate to the characters and the fantastic worlds in which they live. Another similarity is that both virtual communities and anime communities are certainly non-mainstream.

The most important difference, however, is that anime fan community as studied by Napier is most often a face-to-face community. Thus, the profile of the anime fan probably does *not* include the extremely anti-social hackers such as the one described by Ullman (who insisted on participating in a design discussion via email as opposed to in person)[7]. This indicates that the hacker/anime intersection typically only includes the more social subset of hacker culture.

Anime as Art

Anime is a medium, not a genre. Nonetheless certain genres and themes are very common in anime.

Utopia

One common theme in anime is that of the "unlikely hero." Great deeds, indeed so great that they often involve the end of the world, come from what appears on the surface to be a small and unimportant, though in some way crucially different person.

This sort of Utopian ideal is everywhere in hacker culture, from the ham radio enthusiasts to the Masters of Deception to the Matrix, in which "a misfit learns that he's actually cool"[8].

Complexity of plots and characters

Although not a theme *per se*, the complexity of plot in most anime is extraordinary. It demands the type of analysis that hackers naturally apply to everything. Anime often puts the viewer into a situation, and then provides small clues about the history and characters involved. It's a lot like a logical puzzle or intellectual game of the type that stimulates hackers.

Character depth is also an important element of anime. Anime fans differentiate anime characters from the typical "good guy/bad guy" classifications. The good guys are not always good, and the bad guys are not necessarily bad. This is very much in contradiction to Lisa Nakamura's notion of "identity tourism"[10]. Only an extremely shallow survey of anime would give the impression that all the male characters are warrior samurai types and all the female characters are geisha. Anime fans are intrigued by the depth of the characters; often the depth is revealed in much the same way as the plot — through small clues spread throughout the story.

The structure of anime broadcasting undoubtedly is a major factor in creating complex plots and characters. Usually anime takes the form of a long series of 26 or more episodes, or it takes that of a full-length feature film. This allows ample time to develop intricate plots and characters.

The Body in Anime

Sherry Turkle makes it very plain that hackers have issues with their bodies[5]. Anime explores these issues and many others that have to do with the body. Two of the most common genres of anime, mecha and cyberpunk, are concerned with machine extensions to the human body. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a dark, existential, apocalyptic mecha series, young teenagers are "plugged in" to giant robots via a procedure that looks a lot like the reversal of human birth. One of the more interesting questions (of which there are many) that is raised in this series is "where is the boundary between the human and the robot?" In the cyberpunk anime *Ghost in the Shell*, we have the familiar theme that the body is just a shell for the mind: "Ghost in the Shell, while initially focusing on the metamorphic potential of the body, ultimately end[s] up privileging the absence of the body"[1]. This idea appeals to the hacker whose body is considered unimportant except as a carrier for the mind.

Another issue which can't be ignored is the high level of "adult" content in anime, by which I am not trying to refer to pornographic anime but to most "regular" anime, which contains more nudity and sexual references than typical American television. This is in part due to the fact that there are no restrictions on the subject matter of anime in the sense of information freedom that cyberlibertarians support, but also because in Japanese culture adult content has a different definition than it does in America. For whatever reason, it is there; but why do hackers like it? Relationships are typically quite foreign to hackers, so perhaps it is educational for hackers. A more likely explanation, though, is that the sexual themes allow for more genuinely adult narratives which cannot be explored in politically correct American media. In other words, it goes back to "unlimited and total access."

The Anime Aesthetic

The anime aesthetic is similar to Harris' description of the aesthetic of the computer[9]. Harris goes even so far as to say that modern computer systems are filled with "comic-book froufrou" which hides the internal function of the computer. The connection between the comic-book look and anime is simple: anime comes from Japanese comic strips, called manga. The colorful, smooth, articulate aesthetic is common to both the computer and anime. While Harris goes on to describe why this aesthetic is a bad thing — at least that it serves no purpose — computer hackers appreciate the beauty they can create with the computer even if it is useless in practice. Levy's description of the hacker ethic states *you can create art and beauty on a computer*, and he goes on to discuss how a hacker spent hours working on program that would play a song.

Conclusion

The more social subset of hackerdom watches anime because it reinforces their identities and values. Anime shares a certain aesthetic with the computer and Wired culture, thus it is attractive to hackers.

Further connections could be made between hackers and anime in considering the Gothic. Hackers often associate with darkness and night, which to many implies death. Why this is the case is beyond the scope of this paper, but the fact that it ties in with anime is clear. Napier puts forth apocalypse and elegy as two of the major themes in anime, indeed most anime includes at least one of the two themes.

In recent years with the release of such titles as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, anime has been pushing the boundaries of popular culture. It is interesting to note the parallel with hacker/geek culture coming more to the forefront. I close with a quotation by A.O. Scott, New York Times Film Reviewer, which plays on this idea:

> The appeal of fantasy has been especially powerful among those who find themselves marginalized by the brutal social universe of American secondary education: geeks, losers, nerds. You remember them from high school or you remember being one of them, the guys who filled their notebooks with meticulous line drawings of broadsword-wielding berserkers and their large-breasted consorts, who staffed the tech crew for the spring theatricals and dominated the computer club, who used words like "grok" in ordinary conversation. Their devotion to sci-fi and sword-and-sorcery arcana invited ridicule, but was also a defense against it. But such mockery is, by now, obsolete. The triumph of fantasy culture, like the transformation of the cult of the computer into mainstream religion, is their revenge. We are all nerds now. And we had better do our homework.

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