

Quick Guide to
ANIME and
MANGA

Robert M. Henderson



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CHAPTER 2

The Universal Appeal of Anime and Manga

When Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk tweeted about his love of anime in 2018, that statement quickly became his most popular tweet. Rapper Kanye West has said that his favorite movie is *Akira*. Pop star Ariana Grande sports a huge *Spirited Away* tattoo. And many professional basketball players have expressed their love for *Dragon Ball*.

Tech entrepreneurs, rappers, pop stars, and athletes are not the only ones who can relate to anime and manga. People of all ages and nationalities have embraced Japan's most popular cultural export. According to the anime streaming service Crunchyroll, the top ten countries using its site during the winter of 2020 were Uruguay, India, Peru, Colombia, the Philippines, Ecuador, Italy, El Salvador, Poland, and the Dominican Republic. Clearly, anime and manga have universal appeal, but why? What is it about the style, content, and

messages of Japanese cartoons and comics that makes them so attractive to so many different types of people all over the world?

Identity and Belonging

For many young people, anime and manga give them one of the things they want most: a sense of identity. With identity comes purpose, and a sense of belonging. Many fans recall, later in life, how their favorite shows not only helped them figure out who they were but also how to accept themselves. “On the surface, it may have been a cartoon, but it had deeper themes that I could relate to,” says anime blogger Lauren Orsini. “It was like none of the media that had been offered to me before. And at that time in my life where I didn’t know where I belonged, I found my belonging there.”¹⁵

Anime and manga were among the first media to address gender identity issues such as being transgender. The manga *Wandering Son*, which was first published in 2002, ran for eleven years. The series was created by Takako Shimura, who is primarily known for her manga works featuring LGBTQ topics. *Wandering Son* tells the story of two transgender friends; one is a trans boy and the other a trans girl. As they grow up, both try to come to terms with who they are while also navigating school, bullying, and relationships. In 2011 *Wandering Son* was turned into an internationally successful anime series.

Anime and manga often feature characters whose identities literally transform, often through magic. These characters seem ordinary on the outside, but they hide secret superpowers that can be activated by a command phrase. Sailor Moon is one of the most famous characters of this type. She transforms from a schoolgirl into an ancient lunar warrior called Sailor Moon from the Moon Kingdom. With the help of her guardians—Sailors Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Venus—she uses her superpowers to protect Earth from the forces of evil. *Sailor Moon* was massively popular during the 1990s and is often credited with introducing a whole new generation of fans—mostly young and female—to anime and manga. According to D.J. Kirkland, a Black gay comic book


writer who cites *Sailor Moon* as the reason why he is an artist today, “I remember being 7 years-old and watching *Sailor Moon* for the first time and seeing her first transformation sequence and I was just mesmerized by it. Every time the Sailor Guardians held up their hands and got their nails done that matched the color of their outfits, I got my entire life.”¹⁶

Escapism

One of the major appeals of anime and manga, for all fans, is escapism. Escapism is when people turn to entertainment or fantasy to distract themselves from reality. The great filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock once said, “I don’t think many people want reality, whether it is in the theater or a film. It must look real, but it must *never* be real, because reality is something none of us can stand, at any time.”¹⁷

Most everyone needs a break from reality sometimes. People all over the world are experiencing stress and anxiety—about the economy, climate change, the pandemic, and the rapid pace of technological and societal change. But Japanese people are especially stressed out. According to Japan’s labor ministry, 60 percent of Japanese people are under constant stress, primarily due to overwork.

Perhaps that is why one of the most popular genres in anime and manga today is *isekai*, which means “another world.” This is a type of fantasy where the main character is suddenly transported from the real world into a new, more exciting world. One of the most popular *isekai* is called *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*. It is about a thirty-seven-year-old corporate worker who gets murdered one night and wakes to find himself in a strange



“I don’t think many people want reality . . . because reality is something none of us can stand, at any time.”¹⁷

—Alfred Hitchcock, film director

new world, reincarnated as a slime monster called Rimuru Tempest. Free from his stale past life, he uses his newfound powers to create a fairer and more just world. In 2019 the character Rimuru Tempest won “Best Protagonist” at the Crunchyroll Anime Awards.

People who spend a lot of time escaping into anime and manga are often called *otaku*. This term used to be derogatory and was used to describe people (usually men) who had an unhealthy preference for fantasy over reality. Today, though, the term simply refers to people who show their love for anime and manga by creating costumes, fan fiction, music videos, figures, and art. “(Otaku are) not just fans, but connoisseurs, critics, and authors themselves,”¹⁸ says Tamaki Saitou, a Japanese psychologist and critic.

Sometimes, *otaku* are described as outcast loners. But that stereotype is completely wrong. In reality, being social is at the heart of *otaku* culture. *Otaku* gather as friends, in formal clubs, on message boards, at gaming arcades, and at giant conventions.



Some people, often called *otaku*, show their love of manga and anime by creating and dressing up in costumes.

According to one self-described otaku, “For me anime has proved the ultimate ice-breaker. Once coworkers discover we share an interest in the same anime, inhibitions fall and conversations flow.”¹⁹

Unique Visuals

Back in 1963 Osamu Tezuka was the first to ever turn a manga into an animated television series—the iconic *Astro Boy*. But Tezuka had to overcome many challenges along the way. He had neither the time nor the money to make his animation look as fluid and realistic as a Disney cartoon. Disney used an animating technique called full animation, which is when every frame of film is individually hand drawn. Instead, Tezuka and his producers developed a new style called limited animation. Limited animation uses fewer frames of film to create an illusion of full motion. The result is choppy, less realistic, and not nearly as polished as Disney. But audiences loved it. Most anime artists today continue to use the limited animation style that Tezuka pioneered

Fan Service

The creators of anime and manga often present popular characters in ways that excite or titillate their fans. This is called fan service. A lot of fan service is sexual in nature. A popular female character might suddenly appear in a bikini, for example, even though it has nothing to do with the story. Fan service can be aimed at female audiences too, as when male characters go shirtless.

Fan service is not always sexual. It can include food, dancing, cute animals, or violence. A slow, lingering shot over the details of a spaceship or a robot is fan service. Anything that gives the viewer pleasure—but is not necessarily relevant to the plot—can be seen as fan service.

Fan service in anime and manga is often controversial in America. Many viewers see fan service as degrading to women. The Japanese, however, usually view it as harmless fun. They “do not take those sexual scenes too seriously,” says Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, a professor at Yokohama National University.

Despite the controversy, most anime and manga fans enjoy fan service—up to a point. “Fanservice is like a spice,” writes anime columnist Paul Jensen. “Just the right amount in the right recipe and it’s fantastic, but too much overpowers the dish.”

Quoted in Cecilia D’Anastasio, “Anime’s Fan Service Can Be a Minefield,” *Kotaku*, December 6, 2016. <https://kotaku.com>.

Paul Jensen, “Five Steps to Better Fanservice,” *Anime News Network*, July 29, 2015. www.animenewsnetwork.com.

in *Astro Boy*, just as they continue to draw characters with Astro Boy's gigantic, expressive eyes. "From the start Tezuka . . . intentionally created *anime*, not *animation*,"²⁰ says Nobuyuki Tsugata, an associate professor of animation at Kyoto Seika University.

Fans love the distinctive look of anime precisely because it is *not* fluid and realistic. Instead, anime thrills viewers with stylized editing and imagery, bold still shots, striking poses, and dramatic effects. Limited animation is the perfect way to re-create manga because it is basically a series of still drawings with moving details. Some have even called anime "moving manga." In many ways, limited animation's lack of smooth, fluid movement became the style's greatest strength.

Limited animation also encourages the creation of imaginary worlds because artists spend more time working on the scenery and composition instead of movement. As a result, the settings in anime are often visually striking and richly detailed. This aesthetic, or style, is also shared by many video games. Not surprisingly, gaming is a popular genre in anime and manga. One of the most famous gaming anime is *Sword Art Online*, which tells the story of two gamers who are trapped in a virtual game world. To free themselves, they must complete each level of the ruthless game. The scenic landscapes in this virtual world are earthy and lush, and the sky exhibits a celestial and otherworldly appearance. "Young people brought up in a world of computers and video games are particularly open to [anime's] distinctive aesthetic,"²¹ writes anime blogger Angel Qinglan Li.

"From the start Tezuka . . . intentionally created *anime*, not *animation*."²⁰

—Nobuyuki Tsugata, an associate professor of animation

"Young people brought up in a world of computers and video games are particularly open to [anime's] distinctive aesthetic."²¹

—Angel Qinglan Li, an anime blogger

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