

ANIME AND AFFECT: PROFESSIONAL FANDOM AND THE YOUTUBE
PLATFORM IN THE AGE OF MONETIZATION

by

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Abstract

Anime And Affect: Professional Fandom And The YouTube Platform In The Age Of Monetization

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Over the past few decades, scholars of fan studies have been engaged with questions of capital and consumerism in fandom— with writers such as Henry Jenkins and his canonical *Textual Poachers* investigating the ways in which fan-production can challenge or critique existing capitalist structures and modes of consumption, and later scholars such as Matt Hills identifying those challenges as being paradoxically implicated in those structures by nature in his book *Fan Cultures*. As fandom increasingly relocates itself into the digital world, with its ability to connect individuals and share creations across geographical borders— and more importantly, its potential to monetize that connection— those questions of fandom and capital become increasingly important to discuss. Given the high concentration of affect present within fan communities, an analysis of the process by which online platforms influence the affective relationships of fandom will serve as an important barometer for future studies of other online communities as well. As such, I have chosen to analyze the professionalization of

anime fans within the YouTube platform via a hybrid approach of ethnographical and archival analysis. This approach includes textual readings of fan-created content uploaded to the YouTube platform, personal interviews conducted with fan-creators active within the anime community on the platform, and a chronographic analysis of changes to YouTube's structure and conventions over time— with focus on social, legal, and monetary policies in particular. In this thesis, I argue that the conventions of the YouTube platform, such as its subscriber and ad-revenue systems, simultaneously lend themselves to the core affective drives of anime fandom, while necessarily implicating fan-creators and fan-viewers in a more calculative form of play than previous forms of fandom— functioning to transmute subcultural and social capital into economic capital at an unprecedented scale. However, this also maintains that while the introduction of financial incentive does complicate the affective relationships of fans on the platform, the pressures those incentives exert on fans ultimately fail to replace affect as the core motivational force behind the majority of fan activity on the YouTube platform.

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Introduction

When he uploaded his first anime review to YouTube back in 2007, Garnt Maneetapho didn't have any grand ambitions for his channel. There was simply no way for him to have known how that single act would irrevocably change the course of his own life, let alone the impact it would have on the landscape of anime fandom online. With a rapid-fire barrage of dry humor and slideshow images chock full of inside jokes and pop culture references, "The Anime Zone" began simply as a way for Garnt to procrastinate doing math homework while expressing his deep love for the niche of anime he was a fan of.¹ Much to his surprise however, "Gigguk" resonated with his viewers, and the channel enjoyed a modest amount of success amongst members of the anime fandom, slowly accruing some one thousand subscribers over its first few years.² Maneetapho would continue to grow both his own following, as well as help expand the anime-focused community on YouTube in what would come to be called AniTube—helping to popularize a new hybrid of fan activity and critical reception. At first, AniTube was much like any other fan community: a small, yet dedicated group of individuals who produced content out of sheer love of the media they covered. However, over the course of the 2010's, that community would undergo an unexpected change: the fans began to go pro.

¹ "The Anime Zone" being the name of the anime review segment of Mannerapho's channel which would later be dropped.

² "Gigguk" being the online handle named for Maneetapho's Taiwanese nickname.

To put things into perspective, in 2016, that very same *Gigguk* who began making videos for the fun of it, quit his job at the BBC to pursue that hobby as a full-time career and would go on to accrue over 2 *million* subscribers over the span of a few short years. Not only that, but in October of 2019, GeexPlus Inc., a new subsidiary of the Japanese Kadokawa Corporation, flew Maneetapho and two other prominent English-speaking Anime YouTubers, Connor Colquhoun, and Sydney Poniewaz, to live and produce their videos in Japan.³ The trio were brought into the burgeoning “influencer agency” as part of GeexPlus’s efforts in “connecting Japanese brands to global influencers”— itself an extension of the “Cool Japan” strategy of Japanese national policy to “further strengthen the ties between Japan and other countries” via the promotion of Japanese cultural products.⁴

In the early days of YouTube, it would have been unthinkable for an anime fan to make a career out of just making videos. Since then, however, YouTube had gone from a peer-to-peer video sharing site to an empire built on curated content and ad revenue; anime had moved from a fringe hobby to a mainstream media staple; and fan culture had gone from a small, insular community to a beloved brand. Now, it was possible to make a full-time career out of producing videos about anime for YouTube— and just about everything else too. Fans were taking their love for anime and manga and turning it into careers for themselves, with their own styles and subjects of focus. In the case of the three new acquisitions of

³ Known by their online handles, *CDawgVA* and *Sydsnap* respectively

⁴ GeexPlus Inc., n.d., “GeexPlus Homepage,” GeexPlus Homepage, Accessed 09 20, 2020, <https://www.geexplus.co.jp/>; Abe Administration Cabinet Office, n.d., “Cool Japan Strategy,” Cabinet Office, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/index-e.html.

GeexPlus, Maneetapho has built his channel around a hybrid of analytical review and comedy videos— providing commentary on the state of the anime industry in between rounds telling anyone who will listen to watch his favorite underappreciated piece of meta-art, studio Troyca’s *Re:Creators*. Colquhoun is a voice actor-turned influencer who began his YouTube career making prank calls in the voice of Sebastian from the English dub of Yana Toboso’s *Black Butler*, and now makes anime content videos covering anything from spending far too little on cosplays and far too much on tea. Poniewaz, meanwhile, focuses on the more... risqué aspects of anime culture, featuring videos reviewing anime boobs and booze as she attempts to power-level her degeneracy using her self-proclaimed quirk of “yelling loudly.”

Regardless of their focus, each of these individuals are hardcore anime fans who, after multiple years as a part of the anime YouTube community, built a following totaling over 4.5 million between them— leading to their newfound sponsor. As Director of GeexPlus, Meilyne Tran, has said, the project was green lit in recognition of the “positive results” of social media influence.⁵ It’s little wonder why. By 2019, not just *Gigguk*, but the professional Anime YouTuber itself, was a proven concept— and a very profitable one at that. The question then remains as to how exactly this form of fan-activity, largely defined by its uncompensated labor, became a new kind of entrepreneurial pursuit. This thesis shall serve as both an analysis of the circumstances that have led to the

⁵ Roland Kelts, 2020, “GeeXPlus brings anime YouTubers to Japan,” *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/02/03/general/geexplus-brings-anime-youtubers-japan/#.Xry1QxMzauU>.

professionalization of anime fans, as well as the consequences of that professionalization on the practices and mentalities of those fans.

As this thesis is primarily concerned with the functions of the anime fan community as it has existed and currently exists on the YouTube platform, this thesis orients itself at the crossroads of media, subcultural, and fan studies. In particular, I aim to locate this thesis within the discussion of the relationship between individual fan-affect and structures of production and consumption through analysis of anime fandom in the digital realm. In fan studies, works such as Ian Condry's *The Soul of Anime* and Susan Napier's *From Impressionism to Anime* have placed the under- and uncompensated affective labor of official producers and fans alike as being integral to the proliferation of anime fandom in the west, as well as the role of innovations in communication technologies in deepening those affective emotions and expanding the breadth of their cultural penetration.

Where I seek to make my contribution is in explaining how communication technologies— specifically digital sites of fan-production— facilitate changes in that affective play through the particular structures of those sites. Given this thesis's focus on the motivational forces at play within the YouTube anime community, the use of the terms "fan" and "affect" will be of considerable importance going forward. "Affect," as it shall be used in this thesis, will most closely follow the definition used in *Fan Cultures* by Fan Studies scholar, Matt Hills, to denote "the attachments, emotions, and passions of those

who self-identify as ‘fans,’ but who may also contest the description.”⁶ “Affect” may be read in the sense of being a motivational energy towards fulfilling the fan’s desires for connection with others and the expression of feelings held towards the object of their fandom. “Fan” and “fan-affect,” then, will be used in this thesis to identify individuals and practices which orient this affect towards a particular source material; in this case, primarily that of anime and manga styled media, regardless of self-identification of fan-identity. This thesis will similarly use two terms “fan-creator” and “fan-viewer” to denote the distinct modes of engagement of fans on the online platform. The term “fan-creator” will be used to denote fans who express their affective drives through the creation of content that centers on the object of those creators’ fandom and is disseminated regardless of monetization status. “Fan-viewer” will be used to identify fans who do not create content, but instead express their affective drives through the consumption of fan-created content and contribute to discussion surrounding that content. These terms will be used in contrast with “creators” and “viewers”—which will denote actors who share in the particular mode of engagement with the YouTube platform, but without the accompanying fan-affiliation.

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the mechanism at play within these digital landscapes, I will be focusing on the YouTube platform in particular. When referring to the YouTube “platform,” it should be made clear that “platform” can best be understood as a stand-in for “medium” in the sense that it is defined by Marshall McLuhan. The YouTube platform is a medium

⁶ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), xi.

comprising a myriad of audio, visual, and textual media that create an online environment with its own practices and conventions. In the McLuhan maxim, “the medium is the message,” it is understood that when there is an innovation in a medium, the environment changes, and as that environment changes, so do the practices of those that operate within and around it. In his 1974 lecture, *Living at the Speed of Light*, McLuhan uses the example of the motorcar to illustrate this process:

When I say the medium is the message, I’m saying that the motor car is not a medium. The medium is the highway, the factories, and the oil companies. That is the medium. In other words, the medium of the car is the effects of the car. When you pull the effects away, the meaning of the car is gone. The car as an engineering object has nothing to do with these effects... So ‘the medium is the message’ is not a simple remark, and I’ve always hesitated to explain it. It really means a hidden environment of services created by an innovation. And the hidden environment of services is the thing that changes people. It is the environment that changes people, not the technology.⁷

If one were to apply this metaphor in the context of this thesis, the innovation of monetized video content can be thought to be the car, and the YouTube platform that resulted from that innovation, the medium. Further, this thesis argues that the “hidden environment of services,” brought about by this introduction of monetized content to the YouTube platform fundamentally altered the affective relationship between fan-creators, anime media, and fan-viewers— ultimately restructuring the expression of fan affect present on the platform to engage in more calculative expressions of fan-affect, often at odds with the practices of remixing and impersonation that had brought anime media to the west to begin with.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, 1974, *Living at the Speed of Light*, Lecture, N.p, University of South Florida.

In this sense, this thesis will also draw upon the works of Dick Hebdige and the Birmingham school of subcultural studies, sharing in Hebdige's assertion that all subcultures share a trajectory of reabsorption into hegemonic culture via either the conversion of subcultural styles and symbols into mass culture commodities, or through an ideological removal of the subcultural participant's "otherness" via either domestication or complete estrangement as outlined in his seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. However, this thesis departs from Hebdige in that it disagrees with the view that this process of reabsorption is ultimately damaging to all subcultures, which are founded in resistance. Rather, this thesis posits that, for fan-subcultures, the goal of subcultural activity is not resistance, but the fulfilment of the affective drives of its constituents— which can be aided by the results of the reabsorption process. This thesis *does*, however, recognize that the incorporation of this community into the systems of capital present in the YouTube platform largely affords hegemonic powers the ability to censor and suppress undesirable elements more effectively by way of defunding or deplatforming offending channels.

Additionally, given that many fans within the YouTube anime community are both conscious of, and intentional in, their role as consumers within the larger anime industry, this thesis critiques the "textual poacher" model of fandom championed by Henry Jenkins, which paints fandom as a resistive subculture whose "very existence represents a critique of conventional consumer culture."⁸ Rather than approaching fan activity as antithetical to contemporary

⁸ Henry Jenkins, 1992, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York, NY: Routledge), 283.

consumerism à la Jenkins, this thesis adopts the approach of Matt Hills in locating the activities of fans *within* the systems of capital they engage with.

To summarize, the argument of this thesis is threefold: One, that beginning in approximately 2012, the mechanics of the YouTube platform increasingly incentivized the production of popular content within the Anitube sphere through the implementation of financial incentive for creators in the form of sponsorships and ad-revenue for videos which abided by guidelines set by the platform, and the loss of that revenue, as well as incurring risk to future earnings should they not. Secondly, the changes in these systems consequently altered the way in which fan-creators and fan-viewers approached participation in fan communities on the YouTube platform. Fan-viewers, now conscious of the possibility of financial gain for creators, developed criteria for creators to judge their authenticity to ensure only “true” fans would be able to profit from their engagement. Similarly, creators, now conscious of their viewers as a source of revenue, attempted to adapt their content to suit these viewers in order to survive the increasingly competitive online space. Despite these changes altering the affective bonds between creators, fans, and anime however, this thesis asserts that affective bonds to anime media has remained the primary motivational factor for a majority of successful channels within this sphere— provided that creators’ expressions of that affect either remain conducive to the interests of the YouTube platform and its partners, or are supported by enough social and economic capital to allow creators the leeway to ignore certain constraints such as copyright and content policies on the type of content that is allowed to generate revenue. This analysis will utilize both interviews with fan-creators and

close readings of video content uploaded to the YouTube platform, as well as comments and outside discussions concerning that content and their creators.

In the first chapter, this thesis will utilize a chronological approach to explain the YouTube platform as it existed for the anime fan community prior to the introduction of monetization, as well as providing context for many of the relevant policies that the YouTube platform would introduce. This first section will focus on the years 2005 to 2012 to analyze the origins of the YouTube platform, its resident anime fan community, and their distinguishing features and practices with emphasis on the uncompensated fan-creators who helped to establish particular genres and styles of anime-focused content, as well as key initial struggles faced by both those creators and the YouTube platform as a whole. The second section will examine the years 2012 to approximately 2014 as a turning point in how anime-centric content was altered by the development of monetization policies and practices on the YouTube platform, as well as the coinciding changes to the overall anime industry and the impact of affiliated corporations' involvement with the YouTube anime community. The remaining chapters will then explore the impact of the implementation of widespread monetization within the YouTube anime community thematically.

The first thematic chapter will address how viewers' perceptions of fan-creators changed following the introduction of financial incentive and the "sellout culture" that resulted. The second will address how increased competition resulted in fan-creators engaging in more "calculative" forms of expressing fan-affect. "Calculative," in this sense, will denote the prioritization of cost-benefit-analysis over affective motivations in decisions regarding the expression of fan-

affect. The third section will cover the impact of the YouTube platform's various policies, and the impact of the "adpocalypses" on fan-creators' feelings of instability and unease. The final thematic section will consist of a case study of the creator of the YouTube channel, *Super Eyepatch Wolf*, to explore the lifecycle of the fan-professional, and demonstrate one of the more prominent strategies employed by such individuals to relocate affect at the core of their work despite the complications to affect introduced by the altered online environment and financial incentives. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how online expressions of fan-affect are structured and complicated by, but not removed by, the conventions of the platforms they are present on, and the systems of capital they are engaged with. Now then, with all that out of the way, let's jump right into the ~~video~~ thesis!

Chapter 01: YouTube and The Anime Community

On April 23rd, 2005, the nineteen second video, “Me at the Zoo,” became the very first video uploaded to the newly-minted Youtube.com.¹ While originally designed as a dating website, the creators of YouTube would instead focus on the video-sharing aspects of the site, later rebranding it as a low-barrier to entry method of uploading, streaming, and sharing video files without overtaxing the limits of early 2000’s internet speeds. The greatest appeal of the YouTube platform at the time lay in its implementation of flash-based video software— an advantage over other fledgling video-sharing sites in that it took very little knowledge or effort to upload videos. With little by way of comparable competition at the time, YouTube enjoyed an unprecedented rise in popularity; the platform’s first “viral” video, a Nike ad featuring Brazilian FIFA star Ronaldhino, broke over one million views just six months after the site’s beta launch.

However, the company struggled to pay for the increasing bandwidth needed to keep up with its expanding viewerbase; the 8-10 employees were unpaid for a majority of this time, as well. This problem would be mitigated by a 3.5-million-dollar initial investment in November 2005 by venture capital firm, Sequoia Capital.² This influx of funds allowed for the purchase of additional

¹ jawed, 2005, “Me at the zoo,” YouTube Video, 0:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9IVRw>.

² James Taylor, “Sequoia makes 44 times return on YouTube,” Infrastructure Investor, 03 08, 2007. <https://www.infrastructureinvestor.com/sequoia-makes-44-times-return-on-youtube/>.

hardware and the improvement of its servers before its official launch a month later, and on December 15th, 2005, YouTube was live.³

This first iteration of the website implemented many features that would remain staples of the platform, such as subscriptions and playlists. However, it also had several key features that would be greatly altered over time. Of these original features, the most notable would be the sorting of “Featured Videos” by most recent upload; a five-star rating system to accompany a video’s view count; no cap on uploaded video length; and no advertisements on the webpage or within videos.⁴

While YouTube’s refusal to run ads initially gave the website an anti-establishment reputation that helped contribute to its popularity over its competitors, it would be a model that would prove to be unsustainable for YouTube as a company. Despite a further 8-million-dollar investment from Sequoia Capital in April of 2006, YouTube was still lacking the human and capital resources to keep up with its ever expanding popularity. To help make up for that deficit, on August 22nd, 2006, YouTube announced plans to implement advertisements on the platform. However, these initial ads were not the traditional kind in the sense that they were categorized as “participatory,” meaning that users would have to subscribe to the channels of brands and watch their ads voluntarily. The omission of traditional pre-roll ads was done at the behest of CEO and co-founder Chad Hurley, who told news outlet Adweek, “We

³ Gigaom, 2013, “Chad Hurley: How We Did it,” YouTube Video, 28:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZBgQBnQFlo>.

⁴ WayBackMachine, 2005, “Archived Page of Youtube.com,” WaybackMachine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051125043657/http://www.youtube.com/>.

think there are better ways for people to engage with brands than forcing them to watch a commercial before seeing content... Pre-roll ads interrupt the experience on our site, we wanted to create a model where our users can engage with content and create a two-way communication between advertisers and users.”⁵ It would seem, however, that this would not be enough to solve the company’s financial troubles, despite having struck deals with CBS, Sony, and Universal following an initial partnership with NBC. Rather, these troubles, combined with the looming pressures of legal litigation over copyright, saw YouTube Inc. acquired by Google LLC in October of 2006 for 1.65 billion in Google stock, and the platform entered into a new era.⁶

The Advent

Anime-focused content first started to appear on the platform in the period following Google’s acquisition of the YouTube platform. While the Anime Music Video (AMV) format had been prevalent since before YouTube, this time period saw the advent of a new type of Anime-focused content that would serve as the core of the anime fandom on YouTube.⁷ This was the video-essay style format of the “Anime Review” video. In the early 2000’s, there was no established professional site of critical reception for anime media outside of Japan— a

⁵ Brain Morrissey, 2006, “YouTube Shuns Pre-Roll Video Advertising,” *Adweek*, 08 22, 2006, <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/youtube-shuns-pre-roll-video-advertising-86148/>.

⁶ Paul R. La Monica, 2006, “Google to buy YouTube for \$1.65 billion.” *CNN Money*, 10 09, 2006, https://money.cnn.com/2006/10/09/technology/googleyoutube_deal/index.htm?cnn=yes.

⁷ AMV’s, or Anime Music Videos are clips from anime titles re-edited and set to music, the most popular online platform for uploading and sharing these videos being animemusicvideos.org, established in September of 2000.

vacuum that fan-creators sought to fill and provide the rapidly developing online community with an additional space for discussion. These videos would usually provide some form of discourse on a single title, often culminating in an enumerated score alongside alternative recommendations. This new genre was largely based on the video essay format present in other subcultures such as film or video game reviews, as well as on the vlogging style of video that had recently become popular on the platform. This resulted in the creation of opinion pieces that featured light audio and video editing techniques such as jump cuts, as well as a more serialized release format.⁸

With constraints on bandwidth and server space effectively erased with Google's infrastructure, coupled with the protections and recognition of their new umbrella, YouTube's already explosive growth accelerated as it simultaneously launched in nine new countries alongside a mobile site in June of 2007. With the number of videos being uploaded per day already exceeding well over 20,000, the site was no longer sorting videos by upload time, but now had sections such as "Featured," "Most Viewed," and "Most Discussed."

In May of 2007, YouTube announced its Partnership Program (YPP)—offering some of its most popular and prolific users the option to monetize their content using homepage advertisements, and later, the new InVideo (overlay style) advertisements launched in August. The YPP would later be expanded in December of that year, allowing any user in the United States or Canada to apply

⁸ John McMullan, 2021, "The great jump cut (r)evolution: A case for studying the evolution of vlogging production techniques," *First Monday* 26, no. 02 (02), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.10547>.

to join the program, favoring those who “have built a significant audience on YouTube (as measured by video views, subscribers, etc.) and who consistently comply with the YouTube Terms of Use.”⁹ Despite the implication of this system, the bulk of content that categorized YouTube in this time period was largely comprised of unedited, home-video style uploads without much regularity or distinctive characteristics. Rather, the most popular viral videos on the platform at the time were largely either music/music videos or spontaneously shared “one hit wonder” events, such as “Evolution of Dance,” “Dramatic Look,” and “Charlie bit my finger - again !”.¹⁰ These characteristics made it difficult for a majority of channels to establish a consistent audience to obtain the viewership necessary to participate in the program. While there were certainly exceptions, such as Michael Buckley’s celebrity gossip segment, *What the Buck*, the lack of opportunities to generate ad revenue meant that the amount of money that users could make would be greatly limited until over a year after the YPP was launched, when YouTube implemented the long-deferred pre-roll advertisement system in November of 2008.¹¹

With the YouTube Partnership program in its infancy, fan-creators who began to produce content during this time continued to do so almost entirely

⁹ YouTube, 2007, “Partner Program Expands,” YouTube Video, 0:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6tLq9AXwLk>.

¹⁰ Judson Laipply, 2006, “Evolution of Dance,” YouTube Video, 6:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMHobHeiRNgt=1s>; magnets99, 2007, “Dramatic Look,” YouTube Video, 0:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8KyiOWNg40>; jasminmakeup, 2007, “Charlie bit my finger - again!,” YouTube Video, 0:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEqSXDwTq6U>.

¹¹ BuckHollywood, n.d., “BuckHollywood Homepage,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/buckhollywood/playlists>.; Brian Stelter, 2008, “YouTube Videos Pull In Real Money,” New York Times, 12 10, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/11/business/media/11youtube.html>.

without financial incentive, but rather as a form of expression of fan affect. The YouTube platform also served as an alternative social community, allowing anime fans a connection to those who shared their interests, a connection often not available in their own geographical communities. As put by Garnt Maneetapho, the creator of the channel *Gigguk*— one of the first fan-creators to produce anime-focused content: “The biggest satisfaction I get from making this stuff is to get my opinion out there and seeing the views, comments, and ratings from other people.”¹² Creators of anime-related content at this time were characterized by their affect for the material they covered, as well as the desire to connect with others who shared their interests and were invested in seeing their community grow and prosper. With a small, intimate community on a fledgling platform, the anime YouTube community was free to experiment and develop its own archetypes and conventions. This was a time of artistic expression centered around expressing love for the media which it concerned, as well as establishing a social community for fellow fans to share their opinions and direct fellow fans towards titles they valued. Fan-creators of this time developed different styles of content as a means of personalizing that expression and connection, with the primary goal of fans at this time being the creation and sharing of content, rather than earning money.

Additionally, even with the YPP continuing to expand, making anime-focused content was not yet sustainable as a full-time job. One of the first to attempt to circumvent this issue and make anime content creation a full-time job

¹² Gigguk, 2012, “AZ: How to make a Video Review/Rant,” YouTube Video, 7:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZyCxiA-oFs>.

was Tristan Gallant, also known as *Glass Reflection's* Arkada. In 2014, Arkada was the first major AniTuber to launch a Patreon account, allowing fans of his content to donate money in exchange for different perks.¹³ The success of Gallant's Patreon campaign was based in the social network of viewers who already followed his work on YouTube, with a large number of comments on the video announcing the new service proclaiming support and excitement for the opportunity to directly support the creator. At the time, only a small number of creators possessed the social capital necessary to make this shift to professionalization, and it was considered to be a risky venture at best.

The main reason that producing anime-related content on YouTube was not yet profitable was relatively simple. Income from the YPP is directly based on how many views a video receives. The more people who watch a given creator's video, the more time spent watching advertisements, and therefore, the more money creators receive. Anime media was still a niche interest outside of Japan in the early 2000's and was not yet able to bring in the views needed to be a reliable source of income. However, even if it meant taking an initial financial loss, many of these fan-creators say the YouTube platform provided an opportunity to turn a hobby that they loved into a career. *Theishter* recounts the gamble he took on the YouTube Partnership Program at the time:

I did my part in starting this specific combination of genre of anime and piano alongside some other musicians like *Animenz*. Because when I started, no one was really doing it consistently and no one was too serious about it. I saw a couple of videos that arranged anime music on piano, but it wasn't really a career choice. No one really *saw* it as a career choice— as something to do on YouTube for a long time... I just did it because I

¹³ Glass Reflection, 2014, "THE REVIEW WEEK (of awesome) also Patreon," YouTube Video, 7:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJOwY4jH5Kc>.

enjoyed it. And then 2012 happened. Monetization was an opportunity and I thought, hey, I can do a career of something I really enjoy doing. Let's give it a shot. So it went on from there... I kind of went on it 100 percent. I dropped out from university to pursue it full time... I don't have any regrets, I'm very thankful for having it and still having it as a career.”¹⁴

That gamble would soon pay off as interest in anime media began to move away from the fringe and towards mainstream consumption.

Out of the Cradle

In a report published by the Association of Japanese Animations, the overseas market for the anime industry saw a dramatic spike, quadrupling in value from 326.5 billion yen in 2014 to 1.2009 trillion yen in 2019, nearly overtaking the domestic market entirely.¹⁵ To put that in perspective, the entire industry (both domestic and international) was valued at 1.27 trillion yen in 2009, just a decade prior. As to the factors that lead to this boom, the AJA cited the increased prevalence of international online anime distribution and streaming, alongside a new demand for anime products from the Chinese market as the principal reasons. Given the impact that it had on the global anime industry, as well as its close ties to the AniTuber community, a brief analysis of the importance of the streaming site, Crunchyroll, is necessary.

Crunchyroll began in 2006 as an upload and streaming site for fansubs, allowing users to upload illegal copies of copyrighted content for other users to watch. However, after securing the licensing rights of a growing number of anime

¹⁴ Theishter, and Zackary Kellett, 2020, “Interview With Theishter,” Remote Personal Interview.

¹⁵ Hiromichi Masuda, Tadashi Sudo, Kazuo Rikukawa, Yuji Mori, Naofumi Ito, Yasuo Kameyama, and Megumi Onouchi, 2020, “Anime Industry Report 2020 Summary,” Association of Japanese Animations, https://aja.gr.jp/download/anime-industry-report-2019-summary_.

titles following a venture capital investment in 2008, Crunchyroll announced in January of 2009 that it would no longer be hosting any more content it did not have the rights to and became a fully legal anime streaming site. Propelled by the successful global phenomenon of 2013's anime adaptation of Hajime Isayama's *Attack on Titan*, Crunchyroll would then go on to popularize simulcasting—the practice of uploading a subtitled copy of an anime title within 24 hours of its original airing date in Japan. This meant that through Crunchyroll, anime fans both within and outside of Japan were now able to engage with the same content at nearly the same time. The success of Crunchyroll set a standard for future anime streaming services and impacted the AniTube community in two distinct ways.

Firstly, the impact of the introduction of simulcasting saw a spike in the viewership of anime-related content on YouTube. With current anime titles now being released simultaneously in Japan and abroad, discussion surrounding particular titles was no longer delayed by geographical location. This meant that all anime fans, or at least those living in regions with access to the streaming service, could more easily discuss the same things, which increased the demand of viewers for discussion and analysis-based content, such as that provided by the AniTube community.¹⁶ As the number of viewers of anime-related fan-content grew, so did the income from producing related content. While the ad-revenue for the YPP was still picking up steam, many AniTubers began to go full-time

¹⁶ While not the main focus of this analysis, it should be noted that, up until this period, the AniTube community was largely English-speaking, but at this point multiple channels from Spanish and Japanese speaking countries began to gain traction, as well.

with the assistance of a Patreon account. Crunchyroll also played a key role in changing how AniTubers professionalized. In an effort to expand its viewerbase, Crunchyroll began to promote a free trial of their service by providing AniTubers with specific user codes to be distributed through their YouTube channels. This meant that not only would Crunchyroll reach a potential new audience through these channels, but the creators also received a kickback for each user that joined Crunchyroll using their unique link. This marked the beginning of corporate partnerships with AniTubers that would further increase the viability of creating anime content on YouTube as a full-time job.

This would be a welcome change for AniTubers, as with the increased demand for fan-created content also came a demand for increased quality in the production of that content. As more creators began to upload content to the platform, the amount of effort required to produce a product that would be able to meet the expectations of the AniTube viewer base would grow alongside those expectations. Increased expectations for factors such as audio and video quality meant that creators would have to invest more money into improved equipment such as cameras and microphones, as well as more time into scripting and editing.

Being able to make content creation a full-time job on YouTube, then, became more necessary for creators to address these concerns. Not only would professionalizing provide creators with funds to upgrade equipment but being fully supported by producing content would mean that creators could devote more time towards their channel, rather than towards an unrelated job needed to support themselves. It was, however, much easier to do so for creators who

already enjoyed a sizable following. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of Garnt Maneetapho's return to the YouTube platform following a prolonged hiatus from producing content beginning in 2014. After quitting his job at the BBC, Maneetapho announced on May 5th, 2016, that he would be attempting to professionalize his YouTube channel on a trial basis. After hosting a three-hour stream on June 18th to celebrate the launch of his Patreon account, Maneetapho had secured \$2,788 a month from 467 individual supporters, enough to support himself full time. It should be emphasized again that the speed with which Maneetapho had reached (and exceeded) his goal was only possible due to the existing social network he had accumulated over years of being on the platform. However, even if it was not at the same speed as larger channels, he demonstrated that a new creator could come onto the platform with even the expectation that they could turn it into a job. However, as these fan-creators became increasingly professionalized, they became further enmeshed in the systems of capital of the platform, as well as a number of changes that came with it.

Mechanically speaking, nothing major had changed in the content creation process of the AniTube community. Creators produced content, and viewers watched and engaged with it; the only difference was that those creators now received money to do so. The perceptions of this process by followers of these fan-creators, however, underwent major transformations that would go on to irrevocably change the shape of the anime YouTube community environment. The following three chapters will discuss these changes by dividing them into the

following themes: motivation and sellout culture, competition and calculation, and instability.

Chapter 02: Motivation and Sellout Culture

To best understand the changes brought about by increasing monetization, it is critical to understand the gravity of the alteration that the introduction of financial capital had on the relationship between the disparate actors on the YouTube platform. Previously for creators, content existed primarily as a means to fulfil their desires to voice their feelings towards a piece of media and engage with others. In essence, the YouTube platform existed as a system where labor was exchanged for social capital. However, with the introduction of monetization, financial capital became a direct product of social capital, and by extension, labor. In addition, acquiring more financial capital would allow creators to put more labor into their content, in effect creating a feedback loop. By the mid 2010's, many fan-creators now depended on their content's popularity to make a living, not just to connect with fellow fans, raising the stakes of anything that threatened the ability of fan-creators to stay on YouTube. As I will discuss in the following chapters, violating the YouTube platform's copyright and content policies could result in being taken off the site or being de-monetized, necessitating fan-creators to engage in calculative decisions about the scope of the content they create in a way they had largely been able to ignore.

These calculative considerations would also influence the way in which creators operated their channels and marketed themselves amidst a growing number of competitors vying for the same audience. Previously, the fan identity of a creator and their affective relationship with anime media could be evaluated

by a viewer on the basis of creating anime-focused content, given that there was little other incentive to produce that content. The adoption of monetization, then, meant that regardless of the intention of the creator, that affective relationship could now be called into question by a viewer or competitor because financial motivation could exist without a fan-relationship with anime media. This meant that fan-viewers' perception of creators was likely to include an evaluation of their status as a “sell out,” as there now existed the possibility for non-fans to take advantage and profit off of fan-viewer affect. Anitube fan-creators now existed on a spectrum between affective and financial motivations. I argue, however, that many fan-viewers engaged in a policing of content through an evaluation binary of authentic vs inauthentic, resulting in a sometimes implicit but often explicit pressure on fan-creators to demonstrate authentic love of anime.

Nobody Knows Your Face

In response to this policing, many announcements regarding different types of monetization clearly reinforced the creator's fan identity and made use of self-aware, often self-deprecating language regarding monetary incentives as a defensive technique to stave off more serious accusations of “selling out.” For example, in a 2012 partnership deal, the Gigguk channel was added to the network of STARZ Media, the parent company of anime licensing company Manga Entertainment. While this deal would benefit his channel greatly, Maneetapho recognized that this could be interpreted as his being “bought” by a corporation. In order to defuse possible negative reactions to the announcement, Maneetapho used clips from the movie “Friends With Benefits” as well as the title

of the video announcing the partnership to humorously call himself a “sellout,” thereby reducing the impact of the those who might later accuse him in a more serious light.¹

Many other creators would later adopt similar approaches towards their growing connections to corporate entities. Despite these attempts, however, many on the platform, both viewers and creators alike, expressed concern that some fan-creators may care less about the subject they claimed to be fans of than they did about making a profit off of that content undermining the original intent of the creation of the Anitube community.

These concerns were most often voiced in anger, usually as part of an attack on the character of the creators they have deemed as sellouts, usually larger channels that began after monetization had been established in the community. A prime example of this is the case of the channel Mother’s Basement. After rising to popularity following a series of videos providing in-depth analyses of anime opening and ending sequences, the channel began to expand into more general discussions surrounding anime and its industry. The fan-creator of the channel, Geoff Thew, had garnered a large, vocal number of critics that believed him to be entirely profit-oriented and without integrity. This seems to come as a result of the frequency with which he produces content that is sponsored, with one colorful critic going so far as to assert that “[Mother’s Basement] mostly comes across as a sockpuppet for sponsors. Crunchyroll and Bookwalker and Naruto Online or whoever pretty much have their hands up his

¹ Gigguk, 2012, “AZ: I’VE SOLD OUT?! + Updates,” YouTube Video, 3:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHMwBbeW-QI>.

ass, moving his lips like a ventriloquist doll.”² This often leads to others calling into question the motivation behind his production of content, a prime example being the video “There's NO GOOD REASON to Pirate Legally Available Anime,” which is frequently dismissed as being financially motivated due to his ties with Crunchyroll, or, as one Reddit user put it, “a video criticizing his audience for pirating anime (by the guy with videos sponsored by Crunchyroll, of course).”³ These accusations demonstrate a cognitive shift on the part of the fan-viewer, where a delineation has been drawn between “authentic” fan-creators and “sellout” creators.

This is most clearly seen in a string of comments on a video in which Thew details his personal struggle with depression and its relationship to the Yu-Gi-Oh! trading card game, which was sponsored by the web-based mental health portal, BetterHelp. In these comments, as user by the name of Umor made the following comment:

>video about personal depression
>sponsored
classic Geoff⁴

This comment at first appears to hold the same implication that the video was made disingenuously with profit being the main motivating factor. However, after another user replied, pointing out that the sponsor was focused on therapy

² Manaban, 2018, “Why is mother's basement disliked?,” MyAnimeList, <https://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=1724847>.

³ Wotur, 2018, “Just Unsubbed from Mother's Basement (YT/Reddit),” r/JustUnsubbed, https://www.reddit.com/r/JustUnsubbed/comments/8Om7lb/just_unsubbed_from_mothers_basement_ytreddit/.

⁴ Umor, and Mother's Basement, 2018, “How Yugioh Helped Me Duel Depression,” Comment by Umor, YouTube Video, 16:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfMxuqtiM_I.

and that Thew had reached out to the service instead of the reverse, Umor responded with “I know, it is just funny because it is so Geoff. He talks about personal stuff, he genuinely cares about and wants to help people, but he will also always make a quick buck at the side.”⁵ Umor did not find fault with the intent of the video, but rather with the fact that Thew *was* in fact genuine but had made money from producing it anyway.

While viewer support of creators like Thew far outstrip their critics, what this indicates is that there existed an expectation in some fan-viewers that fan-creators ought to provide their services without financial incentives. When these expectations come into conflict with an increasingly business-oriented reality, there is a feeling of betrayal and outrage. There also appears to be a threshold for how much a fan-creator can monetize their content before being considered a “false” fan. In effect, this can be considered to be an extension of “gatekeeping” culture common within fan communities, exercised in an attempt by the video audiences to enforce a fan-creators’ integrity to maintain an ideal of what fan creation “should” be.

Nobody Knows Your Mask

I argue, however, that this process of viewer-evaluation also functions in reverse, that creators without claims to fan identity can be accepted as authentic. There are content creators active within the AniTube community who are open about the fact that they do not identify as fans of anime media, but are able to

⁵ Ibid

become popular amongst fans without being rejected. Rather, so long as creators are able to produce content that presents as being labor-intensive, fan-viewers are more likely to accept them as having “earned” the income that results from their viewership. In an interview with the creator of one of these channels, *Explanation Point*'s creator, Bryant, said that he did not consider himself to be a fan of anime or anime media.

When asked about his relationship with the media, Bryant responded that “I watch it to mostly get ideas for work. It’s not that I don’t enjoy it. I just am not sure that I identify as an anime fan.”⁶ Rather than affective feelings toward the subject of his analyses, what motivated Bryant to start his channel was affective feelings towards the process of analysis itself, as well as finding a niche audience with which to share his thoughts with. Bryant describes his initial thoughts on joining the AniTube community as: “Hey, there’s actually a community for this. People really like this kind of analysis. I really like doing analysis. If I do this kind of analysis, maybe people will like it. And they did.”⁷ While not a fan of anime, Bryant does consider himself to be a fan of tabletop and video games, citing the interactive nature of the media being more appealing than more passive forms such as anime and manga. This is something that is known by those who watch his content as well, as Bryant said, “back in the early days of my channel there

⁶ Explanation Point, and Zackary Kellett, 2021, “Interview with Explanation Point,” Remote Personal Interview.

⁷ Ibid

was a running joke that I don't watch anime because I didn't. I had seen like five shows that anybody had ever heard of.”⁸

However, not only did Bryant's channel not come under fire for his lack of fan identification, but viewers of the channel were both aware and supportive of his attempts to make money off the content he produces. In a video in which Bryant dissects capitalist ideology within the TV Anime adaptation of Aneko Yusagi's *The Rising of the Shield Hero*, he spends the first minute of runtime promoting the sponsor Kurtzpel, and introduces himself as an “online content-based entrepreneur.” A user with the handle NAGleader reincorporates language from the video to describe the transactional nature of their viewership in the comment: “This was enjoyable, as such I will continue to give you ‘the time,’ which converts to ‘the currency.’”⁹

For NAGleader, and many others, the fan identity of *Explanation Point*'s creator was largely irrelevant when compared to how engaging the content was to watch, with many other commenters citing either the humor or insightfulness of the script as their main draw to the content. However, a user by the name of Ronald Corbin hints at what may underlie this attraction in their comment: “Love how much effort you put into the small stuff. Like showing Seven of Nine specifically at the word ‘individual.’”¹⁰ While the example given praises the

⁸ Ibid

⁹ NAGleader, and Explanation Point, 2019, “The Capitalist Hero - The Individual and the Collective in Rising of the Shield Hero,” Comment by NAGleader, YouTube Video, 16:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7MeoCR9CY8>.

¹⁰ Ronald Corbin, and Explanation Point, 2019, “The Capitalist Hero - The Individual and the Collective in Rising of the Shield Hero,” Comment by Ronald Corbin, YouTube Video, 16:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7MeoCR9CY8>.

inclusion of elements that demonstrate the creator's subcultural capital, (in this case a reference to the character Seven of Nine from the TV series, *Star Trek Voyager*) I would argue that the mention of "effort" is more important here. This comment exhibits an express viewer awareness and measurement of the labor involved in the production of content. Labor which, in this case, resulted in the elements of engagement such as humor and analysis that attracted other viewers.

While it follows that viewers would find content with more labor invested in it to be preferable, the fact that viewers openly engage in this kind of labor evaluation is key to understanding the criteria by which content is accepted or rejected by fan-viewers. For example, the anime "Reaction" style of video, which consists of creators overlaying their unscripted reactions to anime episodes or clips, is popularly criticized as being "lazy," "uncreative," and "a cash grab."¹¹ For fans such as MyAnimeList user PennyPinch, "It is slowly setting in that people are actually making a living off of this which is just ridiculous. We have people watching anime giving a meh reaction here and there and boom- that's their income."¹² While the quality of these types of videos is frequently disparaged, the main complaint that appears to underlie that distaste is that this type of content generates revenue in an amount that is disproportionate to the amount of labor involved in producing it. Indeed, in many online discussions surrounding how to profit off this community on YouTube, language surrounding the process is focused on maximizing profits with the least amount of labor, a basic tenet of

¹¹ A format popularized outside of the anime community by YouTubers such as *TheFineBros*.

¹² PennyPinch, 2020, "Thoughts on anime reaction youtube channels," MyAnimeList, <https://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=1832486>.

capitalism. For example, a thread on TheFa\$tLane forum discusses the process of creating an anime-compilation content on YouTube for “easy money,” pitching the idea with the logic that “There are similar channels in movie industry that basically get 1-4 millions of views for 15 minutes of work, but there is only one channel like this in a rapidly growing anime niche.”¹³ The focus here being on doing a minimum of work for a large return. When copyright was brought up as a concern for the viability of such a channel, the Anime Reaction format was suggested as a low-labor substitute that would be less likely to run afoul of copyright restrictions. While approaching content creation in this way may not be rejected by the YouTube platform itself, it runs the risk of being rejected by fan-viewers on the basis of that lack of perceivable labor.

Conversely, when a channel like *Explanation Point* produces content with a high amount of visible labor, viewers are more likely to accept that they are either “authentic” in the sense of having the affect necessary to put in that labor, or to have at least “earned” their income. Additionally, as with the case of *Mother’s Basement*, claims of fan identity will further complicate the selection criteria along the lines as to what they consider to be an “authentic” presentation of fan-creation. While the exact requirements will vary across individual fans, what this chapter seeks to demonstrate is the process itself. The AniTube community is a selective and self-regulating ecosystem that developed an evaluation process in response to fan identity and motivations of creators coming

¹³ SinbadtheSailor, Silver Silk, Scot, and Xeon, 2018, “Anime YouTube Niche - Potentially Earn 20k\$ / Month After a Year,” The Fa\$tLane Forum, <https://www.thefastlaneforum.com/community/threads/anime-youtube-niche-potentially-earn-20k-month-after-a-year.80354/>.

into question. In the next chapter, I will discuss the parallel ways in which creators changed their approach towards creation.

Chapter 03: Competition and Calculation

Competition between fan-creators has been present in the AniTube community since the beginning. The design of YouTube's platform, like many other social media sites, made it incredibly easy to develop a competitive mindset with numerical representation of the amount of social capital a creator had accrued in the form of views, likes, and subscriptions. However, due to the small size of the community at the time, the nature of that competition was largely friendly and often played a role in motivating creators to further hone the technical aspects of their content creation. In sharing his experience competing with fellow anime piano coverist *Animenz*, *Theishter* compares the feeling to racing a car down the freeway: "[T]here's a fast car that you see and you wanna chase it... I felt like, looking at him, his skill level, his performance— it was such a good target for me to chase and that was the massive pulling force in my piano YouTube career."¹ At the time, competition functioned as a way for fan-creators to develop a "style" for their content in contrast to their peers while developing new skills and affect towards the creation process. Following the professionalization of anime content, however, creators began to struggle to stand out, or even survive, amidst a rapidly expanding pool of new creators. While there was still some amount of this collaborative competition present in the AniTube community, there began to emerge a new kind of competition over viewership that was far more common and far less intimate. Rather, this new

¹ Theishter, and Zackary Kellett, 2020, "Interview With Theishter," Remote Personal Interview.

kind of competitive environment saw an increase in more calculative decision making as creators struggled against one another to secure the following now necessary for the survival of their channel.

As discussed previously, the prospect of turning a YouTube account into a full-time career meant financial gain was a central motivational factor for prospective creators, and during the period of the post-2012 AniTube expansion, not only was there an influx of new viewers to the community, but also new content creators. This meant that any new creators looking to gain a following would now have to contend with more and more channels, both new and established.

Additionally, in 2012, YouTube altered its search recommendation algorithm to favor videos with higher watchtime— a change from the view-based system it had previously used.²

It was clear that YouTube wanted to have users spend more time watching content, given that higher levels of engagement meant additional opportunities for advertisements, as well as serving to increase user loyalty to the platform. In their announcement for the new algorithm, YouTube stated that: “YouTube viewers watch a lot of video— over 4 billion hours a month at last count. But the average household also watches several hours of video *per day* on their TVs. So, for YouTube to become the most important media in more people's lives, we've got a lot of growing to do.”³ As YouTube began to promote content that would

² YouTube Team, 2012, “YouTube search, now optimized for time watched,” YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/youtube-search-now-optimized-for-time/>.

³ YouTube Inc., 2012, “YouTube Now: Why We Focus on Watch Time,” YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/youtube-now-why-we-focus-on-watch-time>.

secure more audience “watchtime” via its recommendations and search listings, key factors in predicting watchtime such as subscriber base, viewer retention, and upload regularity became far more important.⁴ This meant that, regardless of the primary motivation behind starting their channel, all creators within the AniTube community were increasingly incentivized to secure an audience for their channel as quickly as possible at risk of fading into obscurity. This meant that creators now had to be able to convince as many viewers as possible to consume *their* content specifically. I argue that this pressure expressed itself in two distinct ways: emulation and specialization.

Footsteps of a Comrade-in-Arms

Given the pressure to quickly find an audience, it’s perhaps unsurprising that many new creators in the community chose to emulate certain types of video formats and conventions that had proved to be successful. Some amount of this emulation can undoubtedly be understood as new fan creators seeking to be like the content creators they themselves were fans of; however, the mass popularity of, and lack of deviation from, the most commonly emulated conventions indicate that this “fan-motivated emulation” is largely overshadowed by a more calculative approach. In order to establish the following needed to professionalize their content creation, new creators were incentivized to produce content that had already proved popular. Many new creators began to emulate the conventions of content that had proven popular to a broader audience outside of

⁴ “Watchtime” being the term to denote continued watchtime of a video following the initial play.

that sphere similar to the genre of anime reaction videos that we've already discussed, in addition to anime reviews, musical remixing, and other types of content established within the AniTube sphere.

Perhaps the most visible example of this emulation can be seen in the proliferation of anime-focused "Top 10" videos. This content was styled after the largely successful format popularized by the WatchMojo YouTube channel, whose influence was so broad and nebulous that their own mission statement was described as to make "a video on every topic."⁵ A single YouTube search of the keyword "anime" is sufficient to demonstrate just how massively successful and dominant the format has become within the AniTube sphere.⁶ What this *also* reveals, however, was the degree to which the AniTube sphere had become oversaturated with this format. While some channels, such as Viniitube or Animesensei, were able to capitalize on the popularity of the format they had adopted and gain their own massive followings, there was a massive pool of creators who attempted to do the same but were unable to differentiate their content enough to persuade potential audience members to watch their content amidst the channels producing nearly identical content. A potential audience only has a limited amount of time to invest in consuming content, which means that viewers are selective as to what they choose to consume. The YouTube recommendation algorithm also heavily influences this selection process as well. Given that videos with higher watchtime are promoted more than those with less,

⁵ Ashkan Karbasfrooshan, *The 10-Year Overnight Success: An Entrepreneur's Manifesto: How WatchMojo Built The Most Successful Media Brand On YouTube*, (New York: WatchMojo, 2016).

⁶ Done without an account or search history to alter the result toward user preferences.

early adopters and more popular creators who began to incorporate those formats would appear more frequently in the search and recommendation results of viewers seeking that type of content. Pierce Riola, creator of the voice acting-focused YouTube channel describes this process as a kind of feedback loop in a Quora post regarding YouTube channel growth:

[I]f YouTube notices a video is not only getting a ton of people to click, but also generating a ton of watch time, it is going to start pushing that video a crap load. This is going to result in it generating even more watch time which is going to cause it to get promoted even more which in turn is going to get it generating even more watch time which in turn... you get the idea. Your video is going to be put into this amazing cycle where it keeps itself perpetually afloat, PA, in YouTube's recommendations.⁷

While this is an undoubted boon for the creator of that video, it is often only creators with little competition or already-large viewers bases who can fulfil the view and watchtime requirements necessary to take advantage of this loop. In effect, this system acts to funnel views away from smaller and newer channels as they are given lower priority by the platform, resulting in a stratification that is difficult to break out of. This process of adoption and oversaturation has repeated itself across multiple genres, with notable examples such as anime-focused “unboxing videos,” art tutorials and showcases, and “meme compilations” demonstrating the adoption, proliferation, and oversaturation of popular mainstream video genres within the AniTube community.⁸ Even if certain formats or styles would be likely to keep viewers engaged with the content, the

⁷ Pierce Riola, 2020, “What is your advice to grow a YouTube channel?,” Quora, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-your-advice-to-grow-a-YouTube-channel>.

⁸ “Unboxing Videos” are videos in which a creator films themselves opening some kind of sealed product and providing commentary; “Meme Compilations” being the editing together of video formatted referential jokes or “memes.”

more channels that produce that kind of content, the less likely that an individual channel is to be selected for viewing. As it became more and more difficult to secure initial views, it reached a point where creators began to adopt the use of more stigmatized techniques to secure initial “clicks” on their videos.

These techniques, often referred to as “clickbait,” involve the intentional use of language and images in the title and thumbnail images of videos that will make potential viewers more inclined to give that video an initial watch.

Generally, this is done through phrases that promise to elicit an emotional response in viewers, inspire curiosity, or appeal to a sense of belonging to an in-group.⁹ Images will often depict creators or characters in heightened emotional states or focus viewer attention on a particular subject(s) through the use of image placement or highlighting tools such as arrows or circles. While viewer retention is usually contingent on the actual content of these videos, these techniques allow creators an increased chance to secure initial video views. As videos that made use of these techniques became more successful, their use began to spread to more niche content as well. *Theishter* describes the anime piano genre of content as becoming saturated with “public performances from [anime] titles with circles and arrows on them, titles that say, ‘You won’t believe what this guy thought when I played this music in public.’”¹⁰

⁹ Emotional responses commonly elicited using phrases such as “will make you cry” or “hilarious” to provide an expectation in potential viewers; curiosity typically being inspired with phrases such as “you’ll never guess...” or “this is why...” raising questions or promising explanations; Assignment to in-groups often utilizing the phrase “only [X-group] will...” to capitalize on tribal affiliation.

¹⁰ Theishter and Kellett, 2020

While utilizing clickbait can provide an advantage over other creators in some cases, in others, overuse of these techniques would endanger creators with the risk of fan rejection as previously discussed. This is due to the reputation of clickbait as being manipulative or disingenuous, which more easily allows the intentions of creators to come into question, ultimately becoming detrimental to the creator in the process. However, the number of successful videos employing these techniques continued to rise, and a growing number of creators continued to be incentivized to implement them. This, ironically, has led to an oversaturation of clickbait videos within the AniTube community as well. Emulation without sufficient differentiation then, has largely functioned to perpetuate the circumstances that led to its employment, with only a select few creators being able to benefit from it within a limited timeframe. However, this type of emulation was not the only tactic employed by fan-creators.

Tactics

While some creators attempted to follow the example of creators who had come before them, another group of prospective creators took the opposite approach, and instead endeavored to stand out from the rest of the community and establish a distinctive identity and brand, accomplished through an increasingly rapid specialization of content. For example, around 2014, a number of channels rose to prominence that would solidify a new archetype of AniTube content in the form of “analysis” styled videos. These videos, popularized by creators such as *Beatrice the Golden Witch* and *Mother’s Basement*, took the “anime review” format, and further narrowed the scope of analysis to focus on

particular aspects of the titles they were concerned with.¹¹ This allowed creators to produce content about popular titles while reducing the risk of overlap between their content and that of other creators. For instance, the channel *The Canipa Effect* began in January of 2014 as a general anime review-focused channel, but after the success of a 2015 video on *One Punch Man*, which primarily focused on the animation of the series, *The Canipa Effect* quickly shifted the focus of their channel to center around discussion of animation techniques, studios, and artists by early 2016. This type of video also synergized well with the previously mentioned change to YouTube recommendation algorithm which placed increased importance on watchtime. The lengthier, more in-depth discussion of analytic content was naturally inclined towards securing audience engagement, and as a result, helped these channels to expand relatively quickly compared to their peers, often to the chagrin of many smaller, less successful channels. In some cases, this has led to accusations of selling out, for reasons previously discussed.

In addition to more focused content, another way in which AniTube fan-creators began to specialize was in focusing their content on a narrowing scope of titles. Previously, the anime fan community was small enough that only the most popular titles with high enough cultural penetration, such as *Naruto* or *Dragon Ball Z*, had enough of a following outside of Japan to constitute an individual fan base large enough to be marketable. Although there were many small, dedicated fanbases, a majority of fans belonged to a more monolithic “general” anime

¹¹ *Beatrice the Golden Witch* being known by the online handle *Digibro* at the time.

community. However, as we've previously established, the 2010's saw a rapid expansion of the online anime fan community in parallel to the anime industry. This saw the establishment and growth of fan communities dedicated to less popular individual titles. What this meant for creators within the AniTube community was that there was now an array of potential audiences of loyal and dedicated fans of those individual titles to base a channel around, meaning that fans could now more easily build a channel around their favorite titles, and entrepreneurs could tap into new niches.

To better explore the mechanics involved in these processes of specialization, I turn to the case of the channel *Kato*, which has specialized its content in both ways as a method of brand identity management.

Kato is a channel run by two separate creators, who go by the handles Hoodie and Zero. In an interview with Zero, the creator describes his fan identity as having “always been inclined to the nerdy ventures. I love comic books. I love superhero movies. I love anime video games. I even love chess. As far as specific shows, people familiar with my work know that I'm a huge fan of *Death Note* and *Code Geass*. Those are among my favorite shows.”¹² Of those different objects of affect, Zero, placing those two favorite titles at the center of his work on the channel; and Hoodie, focusing on content covering *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, began the channel as a way to talk about their favorite shows in their free time.¹³ While the two did not limit their content to discussions of these titles alone, there

¹² Zero, and Zackary Kellett, 2021, “Interview with Zero,” Remote Personal Interview.

¹³ *Avatar: The Last Airbender* being a title of particular interest when discussing fan definition criteria for considering a title as being “anime”.

was an increased emphasis on those three in particular to the point that, by Zero's account, a "large chunk" of their subscriber base consists of users looking for content on those three titles in particular. When asked as to the kind of content that he produces on his channel, Zero described it as:

[A]nime analysis. Whenever anyone asks me this question on the street and when asked to describe, like my brand of analysis, I would say it is mostly celebratory. I mainly talk about— or maybe go out of my way to highlight shows and aspects of shows that I highly value and want to just show my appreciation for. It's very rare that I would make content that is in a negative light ... I would say my background in philosophy has allowed me to deliver a consistent aesthetic of intellectual professionalism that my viewers are looking for in analytical content.¹⁴

While Zero admits that there was no larger goal in mind when he and Hoodie first started the channel in early 2017, his use of the word "brand" here is not incidental. At a certain point, the celebratory approach to analysis that Zero mentioned became emphasized as the point of departure between them and other creators producing similar content. This can be seen in public statements from the channel, such as a tweet comparing a *Kato* video on Zach Snyder's *Justice League* with a similar video from a "slightly more cynical" but "infinitely more successful" contemporary, as well as in the banner of the *Kato* channel homepage, which features the tagline: "Breaking Down The Stories We Love."¹⁵ In both instances, the notion of "celebratory analysis" is invoked as a selling point, and in the case of the banner, that notion is directly linked to the aforementioned favorite titles with images from *Death Note*, *Code Geass*, and

¹⁴ Zero and Kellett, 2021

¹⁵ Kato, 2021, "Tweet by Kato," Twitter, <https://twitter.com/KatoBeyond/status/1377420212748787715?s=20>; Kato, n.d, "Kato Channel Homepage," YouTube, Accessed 02 02, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCn3h6LOHHALY4mYH8XAU5eg>.

Avatar the Last Airbender, accompanying the tagline. In the interview with Zero, it is clear that establishing a brand for the channel is a conscious effort, rather than an incidental one.

When asked about their experience with sponsorships, Zero demonstrates an awareness of the issues surrounding sellout culture that we've discussed previously, as well as a clear intent to maintain a certain brand identity while circumventing those issues, stating:

I would say that entrepreneurially, Hoodie and I are pretty much novices when it comes to marketing ourselves. And it's sort of a balancing act because your attempts to market yourself and increase brand recognition, they're pretty visible and the internet can be pretty judgmental about anyone seeming desperate. So it's somewhat counterintuitive because you want to make your career— you want to make yourself as visible as possible, but you want to be aloof about it...¹⁶

What is important here is the identification of entrepreneurial identity that takes intentional, measured decisions to maximize reward whilst minimizing risk.

While there is clearly an affective relationship between fan-creator and the object of fandom, the expression of that affective relationship is intentional in its presentation. By establishing a clear and consistent identity through that presentation, Zero is able to secure a following within a particular niche. Through attracting these “like minded individuals who enjoy analyzing media,” Zero also succeeds in guaranteeing a certain level of stability of income via ad revenue.¹⁷ Simultaneously however, this careful cultivation of brand identity also functions as a limiting factor on the scope of content Zero feels he can produce. Despite

¹⁶ Zero and Kellett, 2021

¹⁷ Ibid

having the impetus to diversify his content, by establishing such a particular viewership at the core of the channel, Zero is reluctant to produce any content there that would not appeal to that audience for fear of losing that stability.

I would say I certainly have boxed myself in ... I am pursuing other content avenues regardless, and I'm sure there are a few people from this following who will be interested to see me take on a new venture. But yeah, I'd say it is something that interests me, and it is something I do not think interests the majority of my audience... I would do it on another channel— I am not risking the audience ... I'll just be in multiple boxes and very good at compartmentalizing.¹⁸

Rather than risk the stability that he had spent so much time and effort cultivating, Zero would prefer to create a separate site of content creation with which to explore additional modes of affective and artistic expression. What results is once again a kind of internalized constraint built upon and reinforced by the awareness of the practices of viewers, and their relationship to visibility and income.

What the case of the *Kato* channel shows is that the affective relationship that fan-creators have with both the process of creation and the media they engage with does still exist alongside a more calculative relationship with their expression of that affect. While affect will sometimes play a role, both emulation and specialization largely exist as tactics on the part of creators to obtain a level of security and stability while they attempt to expand and grow their social and financial capital.

While the degree to which this calculative approach applies to content creation will vary from creator to creator, its introduction into the AniTube

¹⁸ Ibid

sphere is a clear and direct result of the increasingly competitive environment brought about by monetization. With this, there was a palpable shift in the landscape of the AniTube community, which now exists in a completely altered form from its previous state. As Zero puts it:

I think what people enjoyed about the early era of YouTube is that no one was looking to make it their job. They were creating fun content in their spare time, and that was the majority of the content on the website. Now, as I said earlier, someone who is aiming to be a content creator— they go *out of their way* to produce content. This leads to many shifts in the types of content being produced, the philosophy of producers— content creators, rather.¹⁹

Where the previous chapter established how monetization led to an increasingly evaluatory and selective mode of fan-viewer consumption of content, what this chapter demonstrates is the pressure of the increasing importance of that viewer selection, and its limiting effect on the process of content creation, expressed through the tactics of both emulation and specialization. The next chapter then, will focus on the ways in which creators operate within constraints structured by the platform itself.

¹⁹ Ibid

Chapter 04: Playing by Changing Rules

In the previous chapter, I introduced the notion of pressures placed upon creators within the AniTube community in the context of their changing relationship with viewers. In a sense, such pressures are more “implicit” in nature, given that they are the product of a type of negotiation between creators and viewers, and do not directly limit the content that is produced. To a degree, I have already discussed how these pressures are exacerbated by policies implemented by the YouTube platform. In this chapter, I will be further examining how creators are pressured by, and attempt to operate within, the constantly changing landscape of the YouTube platform itself. I argue here that the policies of the YouTube platform, specifically those concerning copyright and “advertiser friendly” policies function as external “explicit” pressures to constrain the content of creators to be in line with the desires of advertisers and other corporations partnered with the YouTube platform. These pressures are then simultaneously internalized and reinforced by the systems of capital exchange present in the monetization process, even when those pressures are at odds with the affective feelings of fan creators. Additionally, as these policies have been subject to drastic change without prior notice, these explicit pressures have also resulted in an environment of instability that further encourages fan creators to alter their content in attempts to attain a sense of community support and, therefore, financial security. As it has been relevant for a longer period of time, I will begin with a discussion of copyright policy on the YouTube platform and its effects on fan creators.

The Changing Battlefield

I argue here that issues of copyright were initially a hard barrier for fan-creators to make content, but following the adoption of a new method for copyright holders to profit off of unlicensed use of their properties, opened up more avenues for fun-creators to include copyrighted content in their work. However, this would primarily be at the cost of any ad-revenue such works would generate, forcing fan-creators to make calculative decisions as to how much copyrighted content they could afford to include. An important point to note in this chapter is that a majority of the changes in the YouTube platform's policies resulted, ironically, from similar financial pressures exerted on the platform by other corporations. One of the very first major changes to the functionality of the YouTube platform came in March of 2006, when YouTube implemented a 10-minute limit on the length of videos uploaded. This change was an attempt to help curb the uploading of copyrighted material following an incident the previous month, when the platform was threatened with legal action by NBC to remove a highly popular upload of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch, "Lazy Sunday." While this system would not be very effective at preventing copyrighted uploads (as users would simply split copyrighted content into 10-minute segments), it jumpstarted one of YouTube's first deals with traditional media outlets.¹ A June deal that same year would see NBC upload their own official

¹ Loren Baker, "YouTube 10 Minute Limit Deters Copyrighted Video Uploads," *Search Engine Journal*, 03 31, 2006, <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/youtube-10-minute-limit-deters-copyrighted-video-uploads/3200/>.

promotional content to YouTube, where YouTube agreed to help ensure no NBC copyrighted material would be circulated on the platform.²

Following many similar lawsuits regarding YouTube's lack of effort to curtail the dissemination of copyrighted content onto their platform, in 2007 YouTube first launched their ContentID system, which would match uploaded content against a library of media provided by copyright holders to flag videos containing that copyrighted material.³

In the case where copyrighted material was detected, the copyright holder would be notified, and given the option to have that video removed from the site. When a copyright holder chose to have a video removed in this way, the channel that had uploaded that video would receive a copyright "strike." Should a creator receive three strikes, their channel would face immediate deletion from the platform.

This resulted in an increased scrutiny of copyrighted content that saw many fan-creators of this time lose their channels, or, under threat of removal, change the way in which they operated on the platform. As Tristan Gallant from *Glass Reflection* recounts in a 2011 video, after having received two copyright strikes from YouTube, he created a new channel that would be hopefully free of strikes in order to upload more content. However, the new channel shortly received two strikes once again, prompting a hiatus from Gallant, stating, "And that's why I haven't posted anything— because I'm always afraid that if I post

² Jennifer LeClaire, "NBC Partners With YouTube in Content Deal," *Tech News World*, 06 28, 2006, <https://www.technewsworld.com/story/51406.html>.

³ David King, 2007. "Latest content ID tool for YouTube," Google Official Blog, <https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2007/10/latest-content-id-tool-for-youtube.html>.

something, it'll get flagged, and then I'll get a strike, and then I'll lose EVERYTHING.”⁴ For Gallant, the way in which he had chosen to participate in his fan community and connect with his peers had come into direct conflict with the conventions of the platform he operated within. Like many within the anime review genre, Gallant's use of clips from anime titles he covered served dual purposes of providing context for oration, as well as a form of promotion for potentially interested fans. However, at risk of losing the viewers he had accumulated, he was faced with a choice to either operate within the rules of the platform and alter his expression of fandom or take that expression elsewhere. In this instance, Gallant took the latter choice and decided to move a majority of his future uploads off of YouTube, stating that the only videos which seemed to be safe to continue uploading to YouTube were those covering titles owned by FUNimation, an anime licensing company that chose to run ads on his videos rather than have them struck from site— an important point that I will return to.

In contrast to Gallant, *Theishter* refused to compromise on his expression of fandom, and had his account permanently deleted following three copyright strikes concerning his use of copyrighted footage in his piano arrangement videos. In an interview with *Theishter*, the fan-creator explained that, to him, the inclusion of the footage was an integral part of his expression of his affective relationship with the source material:

I felt like putting the footage from the anime onto my videos while I play piano was really a big deal because the aspect of emotional connection is a big deal for me as a musician and as, you know, an empathetic human being. I find that connecting fellow anime fans with that emotion of what I

⁴ Glass Reflection, 2011, “Hello YouTube :),” YouTube Video, 11:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b18vHnLaSQY>.

felt while watching the anime— that was enhanced when I put actual footage from the anime. So even though it was risky, I was so stubborn that I still did it and then ended up, you know, having my channel deleted.⁵

The way in which *Theishter* expressed his love for anime media through the use of footage was something he felt strongly about and did not want to change. However, after losing the 6,000 subscribers he had amassed and having to start a new channel from scratch, Theishter would never again include video footage in his content, instead opting for footage of his hands playing the piano or use of the Synthesia piano software.

However, not all AniTubers were as prepared to abandon the use of copyrighted footage. In order to continue to express their fandom and affect while minimizing the risk of losing their following, the community developed techniques in order to continue using relevant footage while evading automated copyright flagging. In an unlisted video posted in May of 2012, Maneetapho compiles a short list of techniques for AniTubers to do so, including flipping or shrinking the frame being used to differentiate it from the footage it would be compared against, as well as slightly altering the speed of audio in order to alter the shape of the original waveforms.⁶ Many other such videos continue to be made to this day, demonstrating the determination of fan-creators' desire to continue to utilize material denied to them— as well as the effort such creators were willing to invest to do so. However, despite appearances, AniTubers' use of copyrighted material was not perpetuated out of anti-capitalist ideology or

⁵ Theishter and Kellett, 2020

⁶ Gigguk, 2012, "How to Get Past YouTube Copyright Detection," YouTube Video, <https://youtu.be/GcYlCHWC2Qs>.

disregard for copyright law, but rather, was largely a way to properly express the emotions that those titles elicited in them.

In 2012, YouTube also introduced a secondary appeal system to its copyright policy, which required copyright holders to file an official DMCA notice should a creator dispute a copyright claim. While this change did little to alleviate the issues surrounding copyright, it did, to a degree, reduce the number of questionable or false copyright strikes issued. Given that filing a DMCA notice requires proper legal procedures which could result in monetary penalties should they be ruled to be false or fail to take fair use into consideration, copyright holders and impersonators were increasingly deterred from haphazardly filing claims through the ContentID system.⁷ This led many within the AniTube community to incorporate fair use disclaimers into their content as a legal means of defense of their use of copyrighted material as an expression of their fan affect.

For AniTubers, they argued their content did not constitute piracy, but a method by which they could generate interest and investment in the titles they were attached to, which would ultimately result in a net benefit to the official industry, making an ethical case similar to those previously championed by creators of fansubs.⁸ However, AniTubers largely distinguished themselves from that group by maintaining that their content was not a reproduction of that

⁷ David Kravets, 2012, "YouTube Alters Copyright Algorithms, Will 'Manually' Review Some Claims," *WIRED Magazine*, 10 03, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/10/youtube-copyright-algorithm/>; Though this change only applied to claims made through the automated ContentID system. Manual copyright claims have continued to be exploited by genuine copyright holders as well as impersonators for financial gain.

⁸ "Fansubs" referring to unofficial, fan-subtitled releases of anime titles; Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*, (London, UK: Duke University Press, 2013), 174-176

copyrighted material, but served the purpose of criticism, parody, or comment—therefore falling under the protection of “Fair Use” as outlined in U.S. copyright law. While the exact details would vary across creators, videos utilizing copyrighted material would often, in either the description text or on a static slide in the very beginning of the video, state this claim to fair use protection and would deny ownership of the copyrighted material while crediting the actual owners. For example, anime reviewer Under the Scope specifically cites that “All media in this video is used for the purpose of review and commentary protected under terms of fair use. All footage, images, and music used in the video belong to their copyright holders. I do not own the media used in this video. Title 17, US Code, Sections 107-118.”⁹

It is important to note that, overall, anime fandom has had a long and oftentimes contradictory relationship with copyright and intellectual property. On one hand, copyright policies were one of the biggest obstacles in expressing the affect fan-creators held towards their objects of fandom. On the other hand, fans recognized that issues of copyright and policy were key to fulfilling their desire to grow and develop their community, given its symbiotic relationship with the financial side of the anime industry. A large portion of the anime community active on the YouTube platform has been keenly aware of the role they as consumers play within the context of the Anime and Manga industries. That very same AniTuber who uploaded the previously mentioned guide on circumventing YouTube’s copyright detection algorithm, *Gigguk*, three months later released a

⁹ Under The Scope, 2015, “UTS Anime Review: Shiki,” YouTube Video, 11:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pd8bktgF6Q4>.

video which lamented the declining state of anime studios and television programming, criticizing the behavior of anime fans undermining the anime industry through piracy. The video concludes with a list of legal streaming services and a call to action to financially support the industry and convince others to do the same. A majority of the comments under this video, and videos similar to it, would seem to agree with *Gigguk*'s opinion on the matter.

“Support the industry” is a notion commonly seen throughout comment sections when the issue of piracy or the discussion of streaming services is brought up. However, there is also a vocal group of anime fans arguing to justify piracy, citing complaints such as expenses, a lack of either quality of service or library in streaming services, or not having access to legal options in their home country. These fans argue that they, as consumers, ought to apply financial pressure on these services to provide better products, rather than blindly embracing them. A prominent example of one such application of such pressure came in the form of mass criticism of Amazon's *Anime Strike* streaming channel in 2017.¹⁰ Many anime fans expressed frustration with the fact that many currently airing and fan-favorite shows had been made exclusive and had effectively been locked behind a double paywall of \$4.99 per month on top of an Amazon Prime subscription— then priced at \$10.99 per month.¹¹ When compared to the price of other anime-exclusive streaming services at the time,

¹⁰ “Criticism” is used here as the term “boycott” is not frequently used in these cases and is oftentimes actively avoided.

¹¹ “Exclusive” meaning that there were no other legal means of streaming these titles.

this was considered to be a needlessly exploitative service.¹² An important detail to note, however, is that in videos created by prominent AniTube channels such as *Gigguk*, *Glass Reflection*, and *Mother's Basement*, while critical of the service, did not express a desire to see these services fail, but rather heed fan feedback and alter their services to better suit the needs of their consumers.¹³ In this way, fans demonstrate an acute awareness of their role and power as consumers of media and seek to leverage that power in an attempt to alter the state of the industry they have personal stake in to better serve their desires.

As demonstrated here, copyright policy on the YouTube platform functioned to constrain how fan-creators could express their affective relationship with anime media for fear of receiving three copyright strikes and having their channel deleted from the platform. This led fan-creators to implement different strategies to attempt to circumvent the consequences of including copyrighted material in their content. Rather than as a form of anti-consumerism or resistance, fan-creators used these strategies in order to continue to fulfill their affective drives through the use of that material. However, the way in which copyright policy would exert pressure would slowly shift following the increasing implementation of the Google AdSense program on YouTube.

Along with videos being able to generate revenue from running ads, this system also introduced a new option for copyright holders to deal with

¹² Crunchyroll at the time was priced at \$6.95 a month.

¹³ As well as certain practices in Netflix's anime distribution.

infringement. In addition to striking, blocking, or tracking videos found to contain copyrighted material, copyright holders were afforded the opportunity to claim the ad revenue of any such video. As the ad revenue from such videos increased over time, copyright holders were likewise increasingly incentivized to claim the ad revenue generated by videos containing their content rather than striking and removing them; by 2017, 90% of all ContentID claims resulted in claiming monetization rather than blocking or deletion.¹⁴ While the threat of copyright strikes still remained, they were far less common and existed mostly as a deterrent for creators to contest claims of copyright infringement.¹⁵

For creators, this altered the way in which issues of copyright were treated within the increasingly professionalizing AniTube community. On one hand, as their channel itself was no longer at great risk of deletion, newer creators were afforded a greater degree of freedom when it came to expressing fan affect through the use of copyrighted material. So long as they did not contest copyright claims, creators could now utilize copyrighted material at the cost of the opportunity to generate revenue from videos that included it. This change would shift the pressure exerted by the platform from a punitive force to a financial one.

Despite the efforts of both the YouTube platform and creators, as creators continued to grow and expand their channels, copyright claims became an

¹⁴ Google LLC, *How Google Fights Piracy*, 2018, N.p.: Google LLC. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjZv8vnlZbzAhVoSjABHbE7AKcQFnoECACQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.blog.google%2Fdocuments%2F27%2FHow_Google_Fights_Piracy_2018.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2y54wgElUJe8r6ZX11luUD.

¹⁵ For further reading see: Katherine Trendacosta, 2020, “Unfiltered: How YouTube’s Content ID Discourages Fair Use and Dictates What We See Online,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, <https://www.eff.org/wp/unfiltered-how-youtubes-content-id-discourages-fair-use-and-dictates-what-we-see-online>.

increasing point of frustration as creators continued to have revenue claimed from content they felt fell under fair use. The issue with content on YouTube claiming fair use protection was twofold: One was how nebulous and open to interpretation those protections are, requiring careful review to be enforced properly. Short of an actual court appearance however, what content is considered “fair use” is decided by the platform that content is hosted on. This was compounded by the second issue: the lack of YouTube’s human resources compared to the amount of content uploaded to the platform; with an estimated 300 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute as early as 2014, the notion of proper human oversight moved further out of reach as the platform continued to expand, increasingly relying on its automated services to keep up with the increasing amount of content.¹⁶

While YouTube’s ContentID system got better at detecting copyrighted material over time, it still could not differentiate piracy from commentary or transformative works, even with the inclusion of fair use disclaimers. Despite creator’s best efforts and frequent voicings of their complaints, copyright policy and fair use have remained two of the most inflammatory issues on the YouTube platform. In addition to those concerns, a new form of pressure would be applied to creators following a series of incidents popularly referred to as “The Adpocalypses.”

¹⁶ Bree Brouwer, “YouTube Now Gets Over 400 Hours Of Content Uploaded Every Minute.” *tubefilter*, 07 26, 2015, <https://www.tubefilter.com/2015/07/26/youtube-400-hours-content-every-minute/>.

These incidents fundamentally altered how YouTube addressed violations of their content policies and placed further pressure on creators to produce content that would be “advertiser friendly,” and ultimately, profitable. Additionally, the drastic changes brought about by these incidents would go on to solidify creators’ growing anxieties that their hard-fought-for careers could suddenly be derailed by forces beyond their control, and push creators towards producing content that would provide stability by appealing how they understood the recommendation algorithm to function.

In February of 2017, *The London Times* ran an article on how certain extremist and terrorist organizations were airing videos promoting, among other things, terrorism and anti-Semitism, alongside ads from large corporations such as *Verizon*, *Argos*, and *Mercedes-Benz*.¹⁷ The public media outcry against YouTube was further bolstered following the publication of an article from the *Wall Street Journal* that same month, in which YouTube’s most popular channel, *PewDiePie*, was accused of promoting hate speech through his use of anti-Semitic jokes and imagery. As a result, many corporations pulled their advertisements from the YouTube platform, causing both the platform and many channels on it to lose large amounts of income.¹⁸ This exodus of advertisers prompted a quick response from YouTube, and over the following month, the company released a series of announcements on the changes they would be implementing to the

¹⁷ Alex Moustros, “Google faces questions over videos on YouTube,” *The Times*, 02 09, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/google-faces-questions-over-videos-on-youtube-3km257v8d>.

¹⁸ Rolfe Winkler, Jack Nicas, and Ben Fritz, “Disney Severs Ties With YouTube Star PewDiePie After Anti-Semitic Posts.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 02 14, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-severs-ties-with-youtube-star-pewdiepie-after-anti-semitic-posts-1487034533> Wall Street.

platform to reduce harmful content and provide advertisers increased control over where their ads would appear. In a blog post announcing some of these goals going forward, YouTube's VP of Product Management, Ariel Bardin, stated:

We want YouTube to remain a place where creators can express themselves while earning revenue, where fans can discover new voices, and where advertisers have a place to reach engaged audiences. To keep that incredible dynamic going, advertisers have to feel confident their ads are only appearing where they should. Although ad restrictions can feel limiting, they're essential to protecting the livelihood of creators. While YouTube will always be home to videos that meet our community guidelines, today's measures will help ensure the virtuous cycle between creators, fans and advertisers remains strong for years to come.¹⁹

However, these changes did not have the harmonious effect as intended, due primarily to the wide-scale implementation of a process known as "demonetization." Where copyright claims would add or alter the recipient of ad-revenue generated by a video based on the presence of copyrighted material specifically, demonetization would remove the possibility for that video to run ads at all should it be found to contain content deemed "not advertiser friendly." This included depictions or mentions of "violence," "sexually suggestive content," "inappropriate language," and "controversial issues and sensitive events," among other main categories. While the criteria for what the platform considered to be "not advertiser friendly" had been available as early as 2015, what changed following the first adpocalypse was an alteration in how the platform determined what fell under those criteria. YouTube had previously operated on a viewer-dependent flagging system; however, following the increasing public outcry, the platform rolled out a new automated flagging system. This system would be given

¹⁹ Ariel Bardin, 2017, "Strengthening YouTube for advertisers and creators," YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/strengthening-youtube-for-advertisers>.

certain parameters for videos that should be demonetized based on the same guidelines, and flag them for demonetization. Similar to their treatment of fair use, however, there were many issues regarding the nuance and usage of those elements within videos. This would be especially prevalent within the AniTube sphere, given the difficulties involved in differentiating anime-content from children's cartoons.

Many creators on the platform found that their income had been greatly reduced without any notification as to why— and would be unable to see which videos had been demonetized until an update was rolled out beginning on August 17th.²⁰ For professionalized creators, that meant that there was no gauge by which to judge what kind of content was and was not now acceptable to generate income off of, and no telling whether or not their next video would be able to earn them enough income to make ends meet.

The Collapsing Stage

For creators, this period of uncertainty was fraught with frustration, and even after the August 17th rollout, many channels still felt they were kept largely in the dark as to how their content was being treated by the platform's algorithms, with many speculating that demonetization directly correlated to videos being recommended less to viewers— such as in a video by *Nerd City*, which cited a report based on open source data scraping that indicated YouTube's recommendation algorithm devalues videos tagged with variables representing

²⁰ YouTube Team, 2017, "Expanding the ability to appeal more videos," YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/expanding-ability-to-appeal-more-videos>.

categories of demonetization criteria such as sexual content or sensitive issues.²¹

While YouTube has continued to maintain that demonetization is not the determining factor, they have since confirmed that this process does, in effect, take place, stating in a Discovery and Performance FAQ that:

... our search and recommendation system doesn't know which videos are monetized and which are not. We focus on recommending videos your audience will find satisfying, regardless of whether they're monetized. If your video contains violent or graphic content, it could be demonetized. It may also not be recommended to as many viewers because it's not appropriate. In this example, it's not demonetization that causes a video to be recommended less, but the content within the video.²²

So, while YouTube claims that monetization status has no bearing on recommendation or promotion, they acknowledge that the type of content that results in demonetization is recorded and *does* affect video discovery. In addition, given that copyright claims can also result in demonetization, it stands to reason that issues surrounding copyright may impact discovery as well.²³

This meant that for creators, producing content that violated YouTube's increasingly strict policies would not only lose them income, but potentially their viewerbase, as well. This is perhaps most visible within the AniTube sphere in the case of the channel *Misty Chronexia*. The channel, created by Canadian YouTuber Mathieu Brunelle, was at one point considered to be one of the largest

²¹ Nerd City, 2017, "YouTube's Secret Codes REVEALED," YouTube Video, 9:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4NgO69RprE&t=27s; Karlaplan, 2017, "Monetization analysis / research," Google Docs, https://docs.google.com/document/d/155yNpfR7dGKuN-4rbrvbJLcJkhGa_HqvVuyPK7UEfPo/edit.

²² YouTube Inc., n.d., "Discovery and performance FAQs: Does monetization status (yellow icon) impact my video discovery?," YouTube Help, Accessed 03 10, 2021, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/141805?hl=en&visit_id=637556639758391296-3342275249&rd=1#zippy=%2Cdoes-monetization-status-yellow-icon-impact-my-video-discovery.

²³ YouTube has, at time of writing, neither confirmed nor refuted this possibility; Additionally, copyright owners may also choose to restrict access by country or remove videos entirely.

anime-related YouTube channels of the mid 2010's. While issues surrounding copyright had been common for Brunelle in the past, following the policy changes in the wake of the apocalypse, Brunelle saw copyright affecting his channel in a new way. While contesting a large number of copyright strikes on his channel, Brunelle found that his viewership had slowed to an unnatural pace.²⁴ After making an inquiry with a YouTube representative, Brunelle learned that his channel was no longer being recommended or appearing in the feeds of those subscribed to him. Despite attempts to overturn this, Brunelle was unsuccessful and retired the channel in December of 2020. As he recounts in a video announcing his move to a new channel:

... because I constantly get strikes and claims, YouTube has deemed my channel as 'unsafe.' So they've stopped sending my videos in recommendations. Doesn't matter you're subscribed, doesn't matter if you have the bell on. Unless you go out of your way to manually come back to my channel and actively watch my videos, YouTube is not gonna recommend them because YouTube has deemed my channel a problematic channel.²⁵

Parsing through the comments section of this video, it becomes clear that this had been the first video uploaded by Brunelle to appear in the feeds of a majority of his fans. Many expressed surprise that they had not known he had continued to upload, and frustration that the YouTube platform had effectively erased a creator they were a fan of. As of time of writing, Brunelle has since attempted to revitalize his channel, but it is still uncertain whether or not Brunelle's YouTube

²⁴ Resulting from a combination of Brunelle's less transformative "Top 10" style of video as well as frequent fraudulent claims

²⁵ The "bell" refers to an icon representing the option for users to be notified when a channel has uploaded new content; Misty Chronexia, 2020, "Thanks For Everything, I Loved You All... Times Infinity," YouTube Video, 7:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iK_a-kd5oxk&list=PLfcDG1czbVVkioYlBnfdhXdKMZQeEmSEA&index=46&t=207s.

career will ever recover from the blow it was dealt. There can be no doubt that Brunelle, and others like him, had their affective ties to fellow fans irrevocably damaged. Leveraging affect can be a sustainable business model within the YouTube platform, but only so long as the form it takes is able to adapt to new rules. Yet, the platform was not done editing its rulebook.

Following the August 2017 update, frustration would continue to mount as YouTubers continued to find their content being flagged for tangential mentions of controversial subjects, with channels focusing on history and news suffering the most from the changes. Many on YouTube also found the appeal system to be largely inconsistent and ineffective, meaning that many creators were forced to give up on a video that had been flagged. YouTube also went on to change the eligibility requirements for monetized content— restricting it only to channels that had garnered over ten thousand lifetime views on their videos. Over the subsequent months, tensions began to cool as YouTube continued to update the platform and provide more information to creators and advertisers on how the new systems functioned, but before the year was out, another incident would occur that would see YouTube tighten its policies even further.

On November 6th, James Bridle published an article to Medium.com in which he detailed how YouTube's algorithm would push children towards disturbing content masquerading as child-friendly material.²⁶ The story was quickly picked up by media outlets, and YouTube once again saw many advertisers such as *Mars*, *Adidas*, *HP*, and *Deutsche Bank* pulling out from the

²⁶ James Bridle, 2017, "Something is wrong on the internet." Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2>.

platform. YouTube responded by terminating the largest account responsible, *Toy Freaks*, as well as putting out a statement from YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki promising more direct human oversight to help project against “bad actors” on the platform.²⁷ Additionally, on January 16th, 2018, the criteria for monetization was further restricted to channels that had accrued 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours within a 12 month period.²⁸ This time constraint placed even more pressure than before on small creators— heavily contributing to the type of competition over viewership discussed in chapter four. Further, this change came directly on the heels of criticism of YouTube for its lenient treatment of star Logan Paul in the wake of controversy surrounding his airing footage of a corpse in Japan’s Aokigahara Forest on December 31st of 2017. This led to many smaller creators feeling that the system was stratifying creators and was heavily skewed in favor of larger channels.²⁹ This frustration would also contribute to accusations from fan-viewers and smaller fan-creators that larger fan-creators were selling out to corporate entities and receiving preferential treatment.

2019 also saw significant changes to the YouTube platform. After a February report brought to light a ring of softcore pedophiles operating on the platform, which resulted in yet another exodus of advertisers that had recently

²⁷ Susan Wojcicki, 2017, “Expanding our work against abuse of our platform.” YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/expanding-our-work-against-abuse-of-our>.

²⁸ Neal Mohan, and Robert Kyncl, 2018, “Additional Changes to the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) to Better Protect Creators,” YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/additional-changes-to-youtube-partner>.

²⁹ Julia Alexander, “YouTube’s lesser-known creators worry for the future after major monetization changes (update),” *Polygon*, 01 17, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/1/17/16900474/youtube-monetization-small-creators-adsense>.

returned to the program— as well as a 170 million dollar fine from the FTC over violation of COPPA laws--YouTube took a more proactive stance towards removing content entirely from the platform.³⁰ This was further applied towards YouTube's expanding policies towards hate speech, after YouTuber and talk show host Steven Crowder repeatedly used homophobic language on the platform directed towards Vox reporter Carlos Maza.³¹ This prompted YouTube to take a more aggressive stance, announcing in June 2019 that the platform would not just be demonetizing or restricting, but removing content which was found to be hateful or supremacist in nature altogether, stating:

Today, we're taking another step in our hate speech policy by specifically prohibiting videos alleging that a group is superior in order to justify discrimination, segregation or exclusion based on qualities like age, gender, race, caste, religion, sexual orientation or veteran status. This would include, for example, videos that promote or glorify Nazi ideology, which is inherently discriminatory. Finally, we will remove content denying that well-documented violent events, like the Holocaust or the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, took place.³²

Similar to their copyright system, violations of YouTube's community guidelines are primarily handled via a three-strike system where a third strike will result in the termination of the offending channel. Though following 100,000 individual videos during the second quarter of the year. The number of comments removed

³⁰ K.G. Orphanides, "On YouTube, a network of paedophiles is hiding in plain sight," *Wired*, 02 20, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/youtube-pedophile-videos-advertising>.

³¹ Julia Alexander, "YouTube revokes ads from Steven Crowder until he stops linking to his homophobic T-shirts," *The Verge*, 06 05, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/5/18654196/steven-crowder-demonetized-carlos-maza-youtube-homophobic-language-ads>.

³² YouTube Team, 2019, "Our ongoing work to tackle hate," YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/our-ongoing-work-to-tackle-hate>.

during the same period doubled to over 500 million, in part due to the new hate speech policy.”³³

Again, issues arose with these new policies, not with the type of content they attempted to address, but rather in the implementation of detection tools that lacked an adequate system to account for context or usage. This issue is compounded when taking into account the often-esoteric nature of anime media. A pertinent example of this can be seen in the July 2019 removal of a video for hate speech containing the alternating depictions of a WWII era German Panzerjäger Tiger Ausf. B model tank and an iron cross set to the military march, “Panzerlied,” of the same origin.³⁴ However, the version of the iron cross depicted in the removed video was one with the Kanji “黒森峰” or “Kuromorimine” superimposed across the center. This alteration relocating the affiliation of the symbol from Nazi Germany to the fictional institution, the Kuromorimine Girls Academy, of the 2012 Studio Actus TV anime, *Girls Und Panzer*.

As the video’s creator, a Reddit user by the handle *still_guns*, points out in a post seeking advice on the removal, both the song and images used were in fact altered versions of those historical artifacts from the *Girls Und Panzer*.³⁵ The series focuses on the high-school level competition of a fictional sport involving the non-lethal use of WWII era tanks. While making reference to the imagery and

³³ Natalie Jarvey, “YouTube Removes 17,000 Channels for Hate Speech,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 09 03, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/youtube-removes-17000-channels-hate-speech-1236227/>.

³⁴ In line with the aforementioned policy to remove content promoting or glorifying Nazi ideology.

³⁵ *still_guns*, 2019, “Youtube took down my Anime music video for Hate Speech,” r/YouTube, https://www.reddit.com/r/youtube/comments/c8phwh/youtube_took_down_my_anime_music_video_for_hate/.

emulating the tactics of nations from which those machines are derived, the series took great pains to separate them from any ideological underpinnings and was consequently given a PG rating by the Motion Picture Association of America for its US release. The instrumentalized version of “Panzerlied” used in the video, much like the iron cross, was a version used in the series that had been altered and distanced from its historical counterpart. This is not to say whether or not the YouTube platform was remiss to remove this video, given the possibility for misunderstanding and misuse from those unfamiliar with origins, as the video is itself largely removed from the context of the anime title. Rather, this example demonstrates the ways in which even the most apparently obvious criteria for harmful content can hold layers of complexity in their application. The importance of context necessitates a comprehensive appeal system— not only for issues of copyright— but for community guidelines and other policies as well. YouTube similarly stated in a blog post on September 3rd, 2019, that “Machines also can help to flag hate speech and other violative content, but these categories are highly dependent on context and highlight the importance of human review to make nuanced decisions.”³⁶

However, despite the importance placed on human review, the appeals process for community guideline and monetization policy violations, similar to their copyright counterpart, remain some of the most highly criticized aspects of the platform.

³⁶ YouTube Team, 2019, “The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 1: Removing harmful content,” YouTube Official Blog, <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-remove/>.

The anxieties and fears of creators effectively being fired from their jobs without warning from the YouTube platform would only be further antagonized in the December 2019 update to YouTube’s terms of service, which notably that “YouTube may terminate your access, or your Google account’s access to all or part of the Service if YouTube believes, in its sole discretion, that provision of the Service to you is no longer commercially viable.”³⁷ While YouTube would go on to clarify in a later tweet that this section of their updated TOS was in reference to:

Hey – to clarify, the "commercially viable" section is not about terminating an account bc it’s not making money. It’s about discontinuing certain features or parts of the service bc they are outdated or have low usage. This does not impact creators or viewers in new ways.³⁸

Citing the difference in legal binding power of a tweet versus that of a term of service however, many creators were unconvinced. Even as recently as 2021, issues with faulty detection and ineffective appeals processes have continued to plague and frustrate the AniTube sphere. In January, the channel *Sydsnap*, run by American fan-creator Sydney Poniewaz, received a channel strike for promoting spam via a link in the description of her video “The Most Realistic Eroge I’ve Ever Played.”³⁹ The video was focused on the English release of the visual novel, *Majikoi! Love Me Seriously* and featured the link in question led to a giveaway page hosted by the English publisher of the title, *JAST USA*, who also

³⁷ YouTube Inc, 2019, “Updated Terms of Service,” YouTube Terms of Service, <https://www.youtube.com/t/terms?preview=20191210#main&>.

³⁸ TeamYoutube, 2019, “Tweet by TeamYouTube.” <https://twitter.com/TeamYouTube/status/1194365318119989251>.

³⁹ “Eroge” being abbreviation of “erotic game” used primarily to describe Japanese-made games featuring sexual elements.

sponsored the video.⁴⁰ Despite the official nature of the link however, Poniewaz’s appeal was rejected, and the strike remained, which, following a 2019 update to the platform’s terms of service, was treated the with same severity as instances of discrimination or hate speech. Poniewaz expressed shock and exasperation at how her livelihood was subject to a system which she felt she could not penetrate. However, it was not only in changes to policy during this period that would leave creators with feelings of instability.

Infornography

In addition to seemingly unending revisions to the policies and procedures of the YouTube platform, this period of tumultuous change was accompanied by fundamental alterations to the YouTube recommendation algorithm. While similar in scope to the alterations of 2012 in terms of their sweeping effects on channel traffic, unlike the prior shift which identified itself as now revolving around watch time, the exact nature of the changes was far more ill-defined for the public. Many creators saw significant drop-off in their viewership both prior to and following the adpocalypses without any indication as to why. Though, as YouTuber Tom Scott points out in a May 2017 video titled “Why The YouTube Algorithm Will Always Be A Mystery”: “[N]ow at YouTube, it's not that the folks who control the algorithm *won't* tell people how it works, it's that they *can't*.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ “Visual novel” here refers to the genre of video game characterized by primarily static character sprites accompanied by text-based story progression; Sydsnap, 2021, “I Got Put In Youtube Jail,” YouTube Video, 5:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AqFfunUQxw>.

⁴¹ Tom Scott, 2017, “Why The YouTube Algorithm Will Always Be A Mystery,” YouTube Video, 4:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSpAWkQLlgM>.

This is given that, in 2016, YouTube had shifted from a matrix-factorization-based system to a deep neural network, which introduced machine learning to the recommendation engine.⁴² The YouTube algorithm, while still being purposed towards increasing watch time, now existed as a black box whose totality was made ineffable to creators and developers alike. While the exact mechanics of this shift are beyond the scope of this thesis,⁴³ the resulting impacts on creators and others involved with the YouTube platform are not. The recommendation algorithm is constantly shifting, undergoing hundreds of small changes a year. Despite creators feeling the effects of these changes, without any concrete explanation from YouTube, they cannot logically account for why those changes are occurring and are forced to speculate and experiment. When asked about the changes in his viewership over time, *Theishter* provided some speculation on the reasons and responsibility for the decline of his channel:

I think the peak was in 2016 for some reason. My interest in anime was at an all-time high, and I think the algorithm was set up in such a way that preferred my type of videos. My videos are usually shorter in nature, maybe five minutes or shorter, and it's not usually daily because it takes a lot of time and effort to make the videos. So in 2015-2016, those types of videos were still promoted heavily as opposed to now— which is usually longer length, and you need to be very consistent with your uploads I feel ... it's just something I've seen work with myself and with other people, especially back in 2016 ... YouTube doesn't promote my videos as much because they prefer other types of content to compete with *Netflix*, *Hulu*, or *Amazon Prime*. They're trying to keep people on the platform for longer, so to accommodate that, they need to promote certain types of content. And it seems like my videos don't match that goal ... I'm a stubborn guy, so I feel like I'm responsible for the results of my YouTube channel not being as good as it was— because I choose to not give in to

⁴² Brian Marquardt, “A new mobile design for your Home.” YouTube Official Blog, 04 26, 2016, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/a-new-mobile-design-for-your-home/>.

⁴³ Google researchers published a comprehensive overview of the dual systems implemented in a paper titled *Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations* in 2016, though the exact details of their mechanics are still not public.

what the algorithm wants, so I take full responsibility for that ... I think I need to address that myself, so that's why I'm trying different things during December, you know, perhaps because it is my responsibility to find something I enjoy and that would also agree with the algorithm and to address my own burnout. So I take full responsibility.⁴⁴

As *Theishter* mentions, from December of 2020 to January 2021, he began to experiment with different video formats in an attempt to bring his channel more in line with what would be promoted by the new recommendation algorithm. For *Theishter*, these experiments manifested in the form of the “ask Ishhy” video series, which consisted of three videos in which *Theishter* would go on camera and present his stance on different subjects.

Prior to this series, *Theishter* had only created anime piano cover videos and had not addressed his audience in video format. As stated in the first video in the series, this was an attempt to make videos that would “elicit discussion”— an attribute *Theishter* believed to be more conducive to the newer algorithmic changes.⁴⁵ These videos employed many of the tactics discussed in the chapter surrounding emulation, with a particular emphasis on appealing to emotion through controversial opinions and topics. In particular, in the second video in the series, “STOP. PLAYING. UNRAVEL. (Ask Ischy #2),” *Theishter* adopts a heightened emotional intonation while employing more inflammatory language to elicit a more emotional response from his viewers— something he admits was intentional in the third video in this series as a means of “testing different styles

⁴⁴ *Theishter* and Kellett, 2020

⁴⁵ *Theishter*, 2020, “Does Pan Piano really DESERVE all of her views? (Ask Ischy #1),” YouTube Video, 7:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcqvIhS6uKg>.

of what could be entertaining.”⁴⁶ Theishter also made use of the “pin” and “heart” features of the YouTube comment section as a means of highlighting both highly positive and highly negative responses to this approach.⁴⁷ For example, by pinning the comment, “people like him are so annoying trying to disguise their emotions as rational thoughts naaaa man ur just an emotional mess who tries to put down people that dont follow ur exact methods of thinking.”⁴⁸

From user *Papillon*, which sparked a 43 comment-long reply chain—accomplishing what Theishter had identified as a strategy implemented by other successful YouTubers, stating that:

[I]t gives more of a reaction, whether positive or negative, when you put out a strong opinion. So more people are commenting, more people are liking/disliking, more people are watching and coming back and seeing the replies on the comments. It stirs up the pot. And I feel like, in the end, that produces a result that brings more people back and of course, there's more eyes coming back. It stimulates the algorithm— it brings more people back onto the platform.⁴⁹

However, following the release of the third “Ask Ishhy,” *Theishter* chose to discontinue the “Ask Ishy” series and unlist the videos, explaining in the interview that while the videos did perform rather well view-wise, “I tested a little bit out, but didn't— I didn't really stick with it as much as I'd like. I didn't enjoy

⁴⁶ The focus of this video being on *Theishter* warning inexperienced pianists away from attempting “one of the most difficult of *Animenz*'s arrangements” for the song *Unravel* by Toru Kitajima, which was popularized for its use as the opening theme for the first season of the TV Anime adaptation of Sui Ishida's *Tokyo Ghoul*; Theishter, 2021, “STOP. PLAYING. UNRAVEL. (Ask Ishy #2),” YouTube Video, 6:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5kiRQ5p-J8>.

⁴⁷ “Pinning” allows the creator of a video to bring any comment to the top of the section pages, while “hearting” displays the video creator's YouTube icon alongside a heart next to a comment, differentiating it from those around it.

⁴⁸ Papillon, and Theishter, 2021, “STOP. PLAYING. UNRAVEL. (Ask Ishy #2),” Comment by Papillon, Pinned by Theishter, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5kiRQ5p-J8>.

⁴⁹ Theishter and Kellett, 2020

it.”⁵⁰ As *Theishter* makes clear in his interview and videos, this experiment served as a way for him to attempt to make content that would follow the guidelines of how he understood YouTube’s recommendation algorithm to work, despite its deviation from his preferred expression of fan affect, in order to combat the instability of his own channel. As that algorithm is designed to secure as much watch time, and therefore capital, as possible, this can best be understood as an internalization of desires of the YouTube platform and its partners. This internalization is reinforced through the platform’s increased efforts to tie monetization with viewership, with the threat of obscurity functioning as an equally motivating factor for creators regardless of whether their intent is profit or fan expression. Creators who purpose their content towards generating revenue— in line with the desires of the platform— are rewarded with financial and social capital, while those who do not are systematically silenced, losing both. As YouTube itself has put it, “it’s critical that our monetization systems reward trusted creators who add value to YouTube.”⁵¹ Given how we’ve previously discussed how integral these forms of capital are to the continued existence of professional fans, the question then becomes: do the incentives to create “valuable” content replace affect as the primary motivational factor for fan creation on the YouTube platform?

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ YouTube Team, 2019

Chapter 05: Finding Joy

To answer in brief the question posed at the end of the last chapter, the incentives to create “valuable” content, while undeniably a strong factor for fan-creators, remain secondary to affect as the primary motivational force for a majority of those individuals. Given that any professional creator that uploads to the YouTube platform is subject to the implicit and explicit pressures previously discussed, it is impossible for fan affect to exist on YouTube completely uncomplicated by the constraints of the platform. However, this chapter argues that fan-creators, when faced with these pressures, will engage in a process of relocating their affective drives at the core of their work to avoid burnout syndrome while still continuing to produce content. I posit here that this process is primarily accomplished through two main methods: the assimilation of calculative play into expressions of fan affect, which was touched upon in the previous chapter through the efforts of Theishter, and the semi-insulation from constraints through a mitigation of the financial pressures exerted by the platform.

To demonstrate this process of relocation, this chapter will present a case study based on the fan-professional, John Walsh, a.k.a. *Super Eyepatch Wolf*. This case study will showcase the implementation of the aforementioned methods through an analysis of Walsh’s professional career and personal interview. Furthermore, this study will further the argument that, regardless of the methods employed, this process of relocation is ultimately contingent upon, and contributes to, the systems of capital which exert the pressures that

necessitate it. It should be made clear that these methods are neither diametrically opposed nor mutually exclusive, and that individual fan strategies can be considered to operate along a spectrum of affective and calculative play, incorporating differing aspects of both of these methodologies. However, in the case of John Walsh, the focus will be on the insulation method he employed.

For Myself

While the YouTube channel, *Super Eyepatch Wolf*, is widely accepted by the anime and YouTube communities as a member of the AniTube community—appearing alongside previously mentioned AniTubers in collaborations such as “AniTube Rewind 2017” and the Crunchyroll Anime Awards— in reality, the channel exists as an outlet for the myriad passions and interests of its creator, John Walsh.¹ When asked to describe his job as a Youtuber, Walsh replied that: “It's really not anything more complicated than just me talking about how I feel about things I'm interested in. There's not really any grander or higher plan than that.”² Though lack of grand ambition would not exempt Walsh from the kinds of planning necessary to stave off the pressures the YouTube platform exerts.

¹ Gigguk, 2017, “AniTube Rewind 2017,” YouTube Video, 4:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r41zj5m6mDU>; A highlight reel of some of the most prominent members of the AniTube community, itself a riff on the largely unpopular “YouTube Rewind” of the same year; Orsini, Lauren, “Here's How You Can Watch The Crunchyroll Anime Awards,” *Forbes*, 02 13, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurenorsini/2018/02/13/heres-how-you-can-watch-the-crunchyroll-anime-awards/?sh=17743ce77341>; The Crunchyroll Anime Awards being an award ceremony funded and hosted by Crunchyroll to award anime released in the year by category based on fan voting.

² Super Eyepatch Wolf, and Zackary Kellett, 2021, “Interview with Super Eyepatch Wolf,” Remote Personal Interview.

Growing up in Dublin, Ireland, John Walsh spent his formative years in close proximity to media:

My uncle used to fix arcade machines ... I just fell in love with games like *Bubble Bobble*, *Final Fight*, *Street Fighter 2*— like, just all that kind of stuff ... Probably been watching wrestling as long as I've been playing video games ... I think I'm just a fan of storytelling, you know? ... And yeah, I think particularly with anime, like I think that was just this— It was kind of just another world. ... I guess I like anything that's able to take the hardship of life and express it in a way that is more fantastical and kind of beautiful than it might seem when it's just something you deal with every day.³

On display here are Walsh' core affective attachment to the storytelling conventions and aesthetics of video game, anime, and wrestling media and his attraction to the heightened reality of the worlds they present. It would be this attraction that would see Walsh go on to attend the Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology animation program, where his graduate film, “What Ever Happened to Ultra-Man?” would go on to win the Royal Television Society's 2010 regional student competition for animation.⁴ The short film would employ many of the narrative and thematic elements that Walsh was attracted to, mixing animation and film mediums to present a faux-documentary with the fictional Dublin-Based superhero, Ultra-Man, as he grapples with the loss of his identity following his forced retirement into a new, grounded reality.⁵ Following his graduation from IADT, Walsh would spend the next five years or so working in

³ Ibid

⁴ John Walsh, 2010, “What Ever Happened To Ultra-Man?,” Vimeo Video, 6:54, <https://vimeo.com/12558261>.; Royal Television Society, 2011, “RTS ROI STUDENT TV AWARDS 2010: WINNERS OF REGIONAL COMPETITION Tuesday 8th Feb 2011,” Royal Television Society, <https://rts.org.uk/award/rts-roi-student-tv-awards-2010-winners-regional-competition-tuesday-8th-feb-2011>.

⁵ The titular character's name and design paying homage to the Japanese Tokusatsu icon of the same name.

various roles within the animation industry, working both via commission and for companies such as Boulder Media and Studio POWWOW.⁶ While Walsh would also produce fan artwork as well as the podcast *Let's Fight a Boss* during this time, it wouldn't be until Walsh uploaded the first video to his newly minted YouTube channel, *Super Eyepatch Wolf*, that his life and fan identity would undergo a dramatic transformation.

The video in question, “Why you should watch *Hunter X Hunter*,” uploaded on December 20th, 2015, was a nearly 50 minute long video essay in which Walsh took a literary analysis approach to the 2011 anime television adaptation of Yoshihiro Togashi's *Hunter X Hunter* manga series.⁷ The video consisted of clips from the anime series to supplement Walsh's argument that the different aspects of storytelling present in the series represented an landmark step forward for the genre of Shonen anime television.⁸ While originally intended as a rebuttal to the negative opinion voiced by Wollie of the *Super Best Friends* podcast, Walsh had no expectation that the video would actually be seen by anybody, and instead had created it as a means of voicing the things that he himself had liked about the series for his own catharsis.⁹ When recalling this

⁶ Commissioned worked including videos such as “PC Planner,” a short film created in association with Run of the Mill theatre group, St John of God, Carmona Services, and the National Lottery. The short can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/AejGopWdw-g>.

⁷ Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2015, “Why You Should Watch Hunter X Hunter,” YouTube Video, 49:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY3deSWuO58>.

⁸ “Shounen” is not a typical genre so much as an indicator of a series intended audience, Shonen is often used to refer to anime and manga series that are marketed towards a younger male audience and has come to be associated with particular archetypal conventions.

⁹ Walsh would later learn the remark was made in reference to the lower quality 1999 Anime adaptation, rather than the 2011 series he would cover.

initial video, Walsh mused that the notion of producing such videos as a professional career:

[W]as ridiculous to me at the time. You know? Because I can remember making that video— spent three months making it, and a week later it had 40 views, but also just not caring— really just being like: “I think I want to make another one of these.”¹⁰

Like many other fan creators of the time, Walsh began his YouTube career without any expectation of monetary reward or social recognition. His first foray into creating content for YouTube was a means to add his own voice to an existing fan discussion. The enjoyment that Walsh derived from producing that content was the sole motivating factor that saw him continue to produce content at that time. However, after approximately eight months of uploading similar anime review/analysis-style videos to a modest subscriber base of approximately seven thousand, Walsh’s channel would see a significant spike in popularity following the release of the video “The Fall of *Bleach*: How It Happened,” on August 20th, 2016.¹¹ The video was an attempt by Walsh to use various metrics to gauge the decline in popularity faced by the manga and anime franchise, Tite Kubo’s *Bleach*, as well as provide an explanation for how this decline occurred. When speaking about this particular video in hindsight, Walsh was conflicted about his feelings on his work. On one hand, Walsh expressed a deep sense of shame regarding the content of the video, stating that: “I think that was the first video I did that really kind of leaned into journalism— and I had no idea what I

¹⁰ Super Eyepatch Wolf and Kellett, 2021

¹¹ WaybackMachine, 2016, “Archived page of ‘Berserk 2016: What The HELL happened,’” Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160817235844/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6kVU8uNdic&gl=US&hl=en>.

was doing. And there's several pieces of just straight-up factual inaccuracies. I think there's parts where my criticisms of *Bleach* are unfair— so not a video I'm proud of at all.”¹²

However, Walsh also acknowledged that the video was the first of a new kind of video for him, that:

[T]here were inaccuracies and there were things wrong with it, but it was an entertaining video that told a story and there was a there was a vibe to it— like there was— there was emotion behind it. And there was a feeling to it that felt more authentic than I think any video I had made before. Like, it felt like a real expression of something kind of personal ... that was a video that really blew up and really resonated with a lot of disappointed *Bleach* fans.¹³

For Walsh, that resonance would have a measurable impact on both his channel and his life. In the two weeks that followed the release of the video, the *Super Eyepatch Wolf* channel would nearly quadruple in its subscriber count, reaching 26,821 subscribers by September 2nd, 2016.¹⁴ For Walsh, however, the *Super Best Friends* podcast would serve as an even more visceral indication that things were changing for him:

So this is a group of people who I was a huge fan of ... and then one day, they just go: “Did you guys see this video about how *Bleach* got bad?” ... And then like, I realized they were talking about me— and that was the single most surreal moment of my entire life. Bar none. ... that was really the moment that I started to realize that people are recognizing me, and that my name was starting to get out there, and that this might be more serious than I think I ever thought it was.¹⁵

¹² Super Eyepatch Wolf and Kellett, 2021

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ WaybackMachine, 2016, “Archived page of ‘Super Eyepatch Wolf Homepage,’” WaybackMachine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160902124421/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtGoikgbxP4F3rgI9PldI9g>.

¹⁵ Super Eyepatch Wolf and Kellett, 2021

Quite by accident, Walsh had found his entire world as a fan turned completely on its head. For a fan like John, to be discussed as an “AniTuber” was the equivalent of going to a major league game as a spectator, and suddenly finding himself standing on the field— the people he was just sitting with eagerly waiting to watch him play. Suddenly, John Walsh was not just a fan, but also someone that people were a fan *of*— and it was at this point that the pressures of the YouTube platform began to become more apparent in his work.

Multiple videos around this time indicate an awareness from Walsh as to what type of content *Super Eyepatch Wolf*, in its “role” as an Anime YouTube channel, was expected to produce for its audience. For example, in the introduction to Walsh’s video, “The Appeal of *One Piece*: Where to Start,” the language used clearly indicates Walsh’s awareness of his audience’s expectations, as well as the role of those expectations as a motivational factor for the production of that video.

For a while now, there has been a certain ominous shadow cast across this channel. You see, *as a YouTuber*, I’m generally *known for* four things: my long, in-depth videos, my love of *all things Shounen*... and the problem with those former two is that at some point, it means that *I need* to do a video on the series, *One Piece*.¹⁶

In this case, the expectation was that Walsh, as an Anime YouTuber, would cover *One Piece*, given the massive importance of the title within Anime Fandom, and more specifically, its status within the Shounen genre that Walsh had garnered a

¹⁶ Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2017, “The Appeal of One Piece: Where to Start,” YouTube Video, 14:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZqnC-eVwrE&t=3s>.

reputation for creating content on.¹⁷ However, more important to emphasize is that Walsh's creation of this video was then, to some degree, motivated by the desire to meet this expectation.

This shift in Walsh's cognition would manifest itself in his work most prominently around the launch of his Patreon page in January of 2017. While Walsh would continue to produce affective content about things he was interested in, multiple videos around this time indicate an awareness from Walsh as to what type of content *Super Eyepatch Wolf*, in its "role" as a YouTube channel, was expected to produce for its audience. In attempting to meet these expectations, Walsh was seeking to affirm the identity upon which those expectations were based, namely that of an "Anime YouTuber." In seeking to affirm that identity, Walsh would engage in the kind of emulation discussed in chapter 03 as he attempted to base his work on other AniTubers. As Walsh recalls:

In the early days of making videos, I think I was trying to fit into this idea of an Anime YouTuber. And it's like: "Well, what are other Anime YouTubers trying to make? Maybe I should make stuff like that--like have a video called, "Why *Attack on Titan* is Popular..."¹⁸

And while the degree to which this emulation would influence each video would vary, there would be certain instances where that emulation would ultimately come to be at odds with Walsh's own affective impulses.

And looking back, why the fuck do I care why *Attack on Titan* is popular? Like, do I like it? Do I not like it? I liked it enough to make a video about it, so why haven't I been talking about the things I liked about it? Why do I

¹⁷ Given the cultural penetration the series has in the west as part of the "Big Three," an unofficial title for the three most popular Shounen titles of the 2000's. The series is also reported as the best selling-manga in history, with a media franchise valued at over 11.3 billion USD.

¹⁸ Super Eyepatch Wolf and Kellett, 2021

have to take it from this completely arbitrary point of view of pretending I understand why everyone likes *Attack on Titan*. Like it's such a kind of— I would say, a cynical, cowardly video to make, and I would never make something like that now.¹⁹

In changing the framing of his content away from his own, affective experience, Walsh would be plagued by feelings of inauthenticity and distaste for his own work. However, despite the successes of more affective work outside of audience expectation, such as “The Fall of the Simpsons: How It Happened,” Walsh would continue to occasionally produce content that compromised on his preferred form of affective expression— to the point where Walsh would even go on to produce content about subjects, he held no interest in at all.

I have another one which I'm pretty deeply ashamed of, called “What Makes a Hero Feel Real,” and I pretty much only made it because I had made another video called “What Makes a Villain Feel Real.” But the difference between my video on villains and my video on heroes is that I fucking love villains— they're like my favorite thing in the world. I don't give a shit about heroes. So why did I make a video on them?”²⁰

While expectation and emulation certainly played a role in the production of such videos, there was an additional factor involved as well. As with many of the other creators discussed in this paper, during this time, Walsh also began to experience the financial pressures of producing videos as a primary source of income. Walsh describes the night that he started his Patreon as:

[T]he most stressful of my entire life... like it changes when it becomes your job. I used to get up at 6:00 a.m., make videos for two hours, go in to work, get home at 6:00 p.m., have dinner, and then make videos in the evening. I was just running on pure passion— just enjoying it so much and still am. But like, I didn't need to make videos. Now I do need to make

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

videos. And that is scary because like, you know— It's my job and it's a living, and it's how I support the people around me.²¹

During the first year of his tenure as a professional YouTuber, Walsh was under great pressure to produce content at a pace that he considered “not healthy or conducive to good videos.”²² This pressure would not only impact the content of Walsh’s videos but also his mental health and motivation. For Walsh, not only was his new job demanding, but the instability and ineffability of the YouTube revenue system placed an unprecedented amount of pressure on him as he struggled to make sense of the rules of his new workplace.

I've worked inner city retail jobs. I've worked office jobs. I've worked studio jobs. I've hired people and fired people. I've been in many, many kinds of positions. *Nothing* ever burned me out like YouTube did. ... You start working and working and working and you can never tell when you're going to be up and when you're going to be down— because there's no way to know. And every time, you can ask your boss about it— you can send him emails and he just sends you back a shrug emoji— that’s what it's like working for YouTube.²³

However, despite these pressures, Walsh continued to produce videos that would attempt to capture his interests and affective feeling through his signature narrative techniques and editing style— growing his subscriber base to approximately 400,000 by April 2018, from the approximately 160,000 a year prior. According to Walsh, the successes of his first year as a professional YouTuber, supported by his growing audience and Patreon support, had afforded him a much higher level of financial stability than he had at the onset of his YouTube career. This stability would serve as a kind of “insulation” for Walsh, a

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

safety net to support him in case of failure or crisis. With the pressures on his production process somewhat alleviated, Walsh began to take more risks with his videos, expanding the scope of the subjects he covered, and further experimenting and refining his presentation style. Of particular note during this period would be Walsh's upload of the video: "Why Professional Wrestling is Fascinating."

While Walsh had previously delved into topics outside of anime and manga— especially in the "Favorite things of..." series, those infrequent ventures would be into largely anime-adjacent subjects, such as video games or western animation, that would not be unexpected for a channel such as Walsh's. Indeed, many contemporary AniTube channels, such as *Glass Reflection* and *Mother's Basement*, had already established a precedent for the incorporation of such subjects.²⁴

However, Walsh's foray into the discussion of professional wrestling represented a departure from these sub-cultural precedents, as well as the foundation upon which he had built his channel. While he could now certainly afford the monetary failure of a video, this was a risk for Walsh. Not only was professional wrestling a subject outside of the expectations of his audience, but Walsh was also aware of the social stigma that was associated with the sport and its fans, given professional wrestling's status as a "fake" sporting event.²⁵ It would

²⁴ Glass Reflection, 2014, "Arkada Gaming is Live!," YouTube Video, 7:18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9aHBmR6kn8>.

²⁵ See: Shane Matthew Toepfer, 2011, *The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks*, Dissertation, Georgia State University.

not be hard to predict rejection on the part of his viewers. In anticipation of this resistance, Walsh purposefully released the video on the 1st of April— a time when many other YouTubers were releasing joke and gag videos that differed from their standard fare— in an attempt to contextualize that departure and ease his audience into his discussion of professional wrestling:

I'm guessing that right about now, a lot of you are wondering why the hell a video about wrestling is showing up in your subscription feed ... but it's also April 1st, which means your timeline is probably full of April's Fools Day videos, and rather than add another to the pile, I thought I'd take this opportunity and do something a little different and talk about a form of entertainment that I've loved for basically my entire life... to me, wrestling isn't devalued by the fact that it's fake. Rather, it's fascinating because of it.²⁶

Through presenting a combination of parallels with various art forms such as rakugo, film, and anime, Walsh sought to reframe pro wrestling not as a sport, but as a form of “highly choreographed physical theatre.”²⁷ To reinforce this framing, Walsh would support this idea with a narrative oration of pro wrestling events that mirrored the storytelling conventions of anime and manga. For example, Walsh takes the match between “Rowdy” Roddy Piper vs Brett “The Hitman” Hart in Wrestlemania 8 as: “basically an entire fallen hero/villain redemption story arc told in 16 minutes without any dialogue— purely conveyed through the physical storytelling of both wrestlers.”²⁸

This approach would prove to be largely successful, with audience reception being overwhelmingly positive. Commenters were particularly taken

²⁶ Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2018, “Professional Wrestling is Stupid and Beautiful and I Love it,” YouTube Video, 30:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQCPj-bGYro&t=57s>.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Super Eyepatch Wolf and Kellett, 2021

with Walsh's narration of the saga of the "Golden Lovers" with many drawing comparisons to anime arcs and series, as well as the emotional catharsis that they associated with them. For Walsh, this video also represented a "step up in terms of storytelling" and would mark the start of a new mindset in approaching his content creation, stating that "if I can make people care about this professional wrestling, considering most of my audience are into anime, then I know I'm good. Then I know I can feasibly cover anything in the world."²⁹ Where Walsh had previously tailored his content through emulation and specialization in order to be accepted by his audience, the success of this video, which completely deviated from the conventional wisdom of the platform, would see Walsh become privy to the selection criteria of fans which prizes visible labor and affect over subject matter or formatting.

Walsh's success would further insulate him from platform pressures and embolden him to go on to take more risks when it came to his content by making decisions that were primarily affective, rather than calculative in nature. This would be reflected not only in the choice of subject matter as was the case with his pro wrestling video, but also in his approach to content and monetization. That is to say, Walsh would begin to include elements that he knew would lead to the demonetization of his content in order to improve its quality. For example, in a video concerning fake martial arts, Walsh included approximately 40 seconds of audio from the Drowning Pools song, "Let the Bodies Hit the Floor." This is something that Walsh "knew would get the video demonetized, and I decided I

²⁹ Ibid

was OK with it.”³⁰ The video, “The Bizarre World of Fake Martial Arts,” ended up doing extremely well, accumulating over 6.3 million views, and becoming Walsh’s second most popular video of all time. According to Walsh’s estimates, his decision to include that audio would end up costing him between 5 and 8 thousand dollars euro. However, he maintained that: “I still wouldn’t change that. I’d rather the video be good.”³¹ It should be emphasized however, that Walsh did not make decisions such as these out purely out of an abundance of affective feelings, but also because his accumulation of social and financial capital would serve to insulate him from the pressures he was previously subject to. As Walsh muses:

I kind of learned that I can't bullshit myself and I can't bullshit my audience. Like, if I'm not into something, they're going to pick up on it. And so if that means, OK, you're going to take a couple of extra days here and you're going to really figure out what you want to say... and I'm in a very privileged position to be able to do that as well. I release a video every three to four weeks, I take my time, and I do it right. That's not because I'm a better YouTuber than anyone else. That's because I have been lucky enough to make enough money from YouTube that I can afford to do that.³²

While Walsh’s defiance of conventional YouTube practices could be interpreted by scholars in a similar manner to Jenkins as anticapitalistic or resistive, the fact remains that that defiance is founded upon the same accumulation of social and financial capital that lies at the heart of the YouTube platform’s profit structure. Given that, as we’ve previously discussed, the YouTube platform generates revenue based on viewer engagement, even if an individual chooses not to

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

monetize some of their videos, so long as those videos are hosted on the platform, they will continue to funnel viewers into monetized videos through the YouTube recommendation algorithm, and thus, do not have a negative impact on the platform's revenue streams. Though ironically, the instability of the platform's monetization structure, for reasons discussed in chapter 04, increasingly push fan-creators outside of the YouTube platform to seek supplemental modes of converting their social capital into income. As Walsh puts it: "I don't count on anything with YouTube. I am always keen to have a new revenue stream because I never know when one of them's just going to disappear."³³

This case study serves to function as a guide map for how the process of insulation functions within the lifecycle of a professional fan on the YouTube platform. Through the case of John Walsh, it is evident how fan-creators can enter the platform primarily motivated by affect, but upon professionalizing, will find that affect at odds with the calculative ideation and practices conducive to making that content production profitable enough to be a full-time occupation. However, once a fan creator has accrued enough social and financial capital to serve as a stable base, they are able to take more risks and reduce the amount of calculation involved in content creation as they gradually reorient their work towards their affective impulses. However, this should not be read as a condemnation of the monetization of content as being detrimental to fan-affect. Rather, by providing fan-creators a platform that allows them to produce content as a full-time career, the YouTube platform also affords fan-creators the ability to

³³ Ibid

invest more time and energy into pursuing their affective drives. To hear Walsh tell it in his own words:

I think to do it at the scale I do, I need to get paid for it for sure, because otherwise I would starve to death... but it's never really gotten to the point where I felt like it's something I *have* to do. Like it's always something I want to do. Whenever I take time away from making videos, I get real itchy to start creating again because I still feel like I'm learning. I still feel like there's so many more ways I can express myself. There's so many new filmmaking techniques— new frameworks of looking at something. There's new pieces of media out there to find and discover. And it's exciting, you know? It always kind of feels like an adventure to me.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid

Conclusion

As I have discussed in this thesis, the expansion of the YouTube platform, coupled with the rise in popularity of anime media in the west in the late 2000's and early 2010's, saw the popularization of anime-focused online video content. Fan creators were now able to share their passions in new ways on an unprecedented scale— and with the introduction of ad-based revenue systems to the platform, it became increasingly possible for those fans to do so as a career— meaning that fan-creators could then devote more time and energy creating higher-quality content. With that expansion, however, came an increase in competition within that online environment, which, when combined with changing monetary and content policies, made both achieving and maintaining professional status increasingly difficult. The introduction of monetary incentive also introduced a complicating factor in the perceived affective relationship between fan-creators, fan-viewers, and the media of which they consumed.

Effectively, within this online environment, anime fandom would shift from a gift economy to a market economy in which viewers' time and engagement would be exchanged for financial capital . This is something that all parties involved would be privy to as well and would lead to an increase in calculative decision making on the part of both fan-creators and fan-viewers. While fans developed their own sets of criteria for determining “authentic” fan-creators worthy of their engagement, fan-creators adopted strategies that would appeal to those viewers whilst operating within the rapidly shifting boundaries of what YouTube's policies would allow to be viewed and monetized. The financial

pressure of conforming to these expectations in order to make a living would see fan-creators' affective impulses come into conflict with the calculative strategies necessary for the continued relevance and profitability of their content. For fan-professionals, it then became necessary to accrue a certain degree of social and financial capital in order to be able to afford the losses that forgoing such calculation could entail. There is no doubt that, through the systems it has implemented, the YouTube platform has irrevocably altered how fans express affect within its digital landscape. Despite all the complications they face within that space, however, fans remain unwaveringly driven by affect.

Fan-professionals, much like all kinds of professionals, are subject to the rules and conventions of the workplace they find themselves in. The YouTube platform is a workplace whose rules are constantly in flux, while it may afford great opportunity to some one day, its doors may be barred the next. To be a fan-professional is to constantly evolve and alter the way in which you work to match the twisting landscape. However, the nature of a fan is one who is driven by a love of something— no matter what form that love may take, no matter how the space in which it is expressed may change its shape, that love remains a steady constant.

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