

THE LOST YEAR OF ANIME CONVENTIONS:
OBSERVATIONS FROM FANIMECON 2020

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: The Lost Year of Anime Conventions: Observations from FanimeCon 2020

As a result of the pandemic in 2020, many large fan-events canceled to adhere to health guidelines. From this context, conventions had to change their models to virtual entities. This thesis investigates the fan production of the virtual FanimeCon, based in San Jose, CA, during the COVID-19 pandemic. After setting up the history of anime conventions, including concepts of other fan producers and Fanime history, the study used participant-observation and digital interviews with eight respondents to show how fans moved into the role of producers. This information was analyzed to identify the motivations behind fans acting as producers of this convention. From the results, those motivations align with ideas of interactivity, community, and desire to recreate the convention in the absence of an official event. This fan-produced Fanime was a one-time event that resulted directly from the pandemic disruption, which caused a lost year of anime conventions.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: ANIME CONVENTIONS IN A PANDEMIC

1.1 Introduction: Topic and Research

Located in northern California, FanimeCon (referred to as Fanime hereafter) is one of the largest anime conventions (also referred to as cons) on the West Coast, with the latest attendance numbers above 35,000 attendees in 2019.¹ It has a long history spanning over twenty-five years, from humble beginnings in anime clubs to an organization typical of large-scale conventions. Conventions of this nature constitute fan spaces, which I employ Jen McConnel's definition as "actual or virtual gathering spaces for members of the fandom."² Fandom, in this case, is the collective fan community of a particular topic. This thesis explores fandoms of Japanese popular culture, especially anime, manga, and video games. While anime conventions serve as important fan spaces, the disruption of the 2020 pandemic ultimately changed the trajectory of conventions for the year. In this thesis, I argue that, due to pandemic pressures, the disruption of Fanime 2020 left open a gap for fans to act as producers of their virtual version of the convention.

To first summarize the trajectory of events I will explore in this thesis. For 2020, Fanime stated early on that they decided to hold the event while following new CDC guidelines and social distancing during the live event.³ Eventually, due to increasing pressures and careful consideration, the convention staff deferred. In the absence of a physical con, fans came together to create a virtual version over the weekend of May 21 to 25, 2020. In making the virtual Fanime

¹ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2019 Attendance*, AnimeCons.com, June 2019. <https://animecons.com/events/info/11176/fanimecon-2019>.

² Jen McConnel, "Fan Spaces as Third Spaces: Tapping into the Creative Community of Fandom," *English Journal* 109, no. 1 (2019): 45-51.

³ Eric Wu, *FanimeCon - COVID-19 Update from FanimeCon*, Fanime.com, March 22, 2020. <https://www.fanime.com/news/covid-19-update-from-fanimecon-chair/>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - Santa Clara County, California*. May. Accessed 2020. <https://www.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/california-santa-clara-county.html>

in 2020, fans acted as organizers, producers of their convention, usually a role designated to staff. This was a change between the relationship of the convention organization, which is typically a volunteer-run but underneath a structured hierarchy, whereas attendees moved into the role of producers of the convention. Changes in fan engagement in this way is an example of what Thomas Lamarre states where, “producers are, above all, fans; and fans are budding producers,” indicating that at the basis, a convention is a labor of fans.⁴ The fans acting as producers of the virtual convention was ultimately the result of pandemic pressures on Fanime, causing a deferment, as shown by interview data, participant observation, and the overall timeline of announcements regarding the convention.

Looking at conventions provides a targeted view as “one manifestation of a fan community and its organizational structures,” as explained by Nicolle Lamerichs in her ethnographic study of fan conventions.⁵ The term “anime conventions,” as I use in this thesis, is a reference to a specific version of large fan events, which generally start as small gatherings of anime clubs that can grow into gigantic fan-gatherings that connect both industry and fans together in a single, physical space. As that single manifestation, my focus on Fanime looks at the year 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes to the convention structure as a result. Thus the timeline of this thesis centers between January 2020 and May 2020. The study is a digital ethnographic-driven thesis that relies on interviews, participant observation, and social media/digital interactions between staff and attendees. While this allows for a comprehensive data set that can easily include hundreds of tweets directed to the main @FanimeCon account, it also encapsulates a specific moment furthered by interview data. The

⁴ Thomas LaMarre, “Otaku Movement,” In *Japan After Japan* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 367.

⁵ Nicolle Lamerichs, “Fan Membership: Traditional and Digital Fieldwork,” in *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, BV, 2018).

virtual convention element relies on the interactions of attendees coming together and taking over as the producers of the convention. However, this information comes limited, from final productions of videos, posts, and direct from interviews which may carry biased information. An entire section includes an interview with one of the event coordinators to look specifically at the virtual convention. Announcements and official posts offer a reliable timeline from Fanime directly. Those announcements were cross-posted to Twitter and Facebook, where attendees could interact directly with the accounts and staff. These posts prompted a deluge of reactions, from both delight to anger, over the impending decision of whether or not the convention would be able to go on within the COVID-19 guidelines that severely limited gatherings. With the situation of the con deferral, attendees formed the virtual Fanime.

To support my argument about fans, or attendees, acting in place of staff as the producers of the virtual Fanime due to the pivoting of the event during the pandemic, I first situate Fanime as an anime convention, examining its creation through the growth of American anime cons starting in the 1980s. Within this argument exists a bridge between anime clubs and fansubbers, or groups of people who created and circulated self-made translations of anime video tapes, who acted as early fan producers, thereby assisting with the distribution of media used by anime clubs which eventually led to some of the first anime conventions. By exploring its history stemming from these anime clubs and an increased interest in Japanese media, I chart the long-running history of Fanime, framing how this specific con uses standard components of American anime cons. Coupled with information about the staff organization, I further my argument of attendee fans as producers by addressing the changes made from previous versions of the con to the virtual incarnation of 2020. As fans run the virtual convention, the model and organization differ from that of any prior Fanime. Second, I analyze data culled from interviews with Fanime attendees and staff, supplemented by social media public responses and participant-observation

data, to give an inside look at how the changes made during the pandemic affected attendees and staff. Through their experiences, I lay out the creation of the virtual convention due to outside factors and the internal drive of fans. Using this data, I connect those experiences to the change of organization. These experiences relate to the core of this thesis showing how a specific convention responded to COVID-19, along with attendee and staff reactions and virtual convention that fans created. These responses highlight the change of dynamic between staff and attendees in terms of organization, though they remain connected by the enjoyment of anime and desire to have the convention. Finally, I conclude using the laid-out information to comprehensively show that the pivots made during the pandemic, the reaction of Fanime, and the motivations from fans, created a situation where fans became the producers of the virtual version of Fanime.

As Benjamin Woo et al. explains in their paper regarding conventions, I consider conventions as “first and foremost media-oriented events” that are “deeply shaped by the specific media to which they and their participants attend.”⁶ The specific media is Japanese popular culture for anime conventions, including anime, manga, video games, music, and other cultural elements. Fans participate in these conventions as attendees who purchase tickets for badges that allow access to the convention and events. Staple events generally include anime video programming, often showcasing new or popular anime titles or films, attendee cosplay (dressing up as a character from a series) showcases and competitions, an “Artist Alley,” where artists can sign up and pay for a table to sell fanart, panels, which are presentations from fans regarding an entire range of events, and a “Dealer's Hall,” where exhibitors pay a fee to showcase and sell

⁶ Benjamin Woo et al, “Theorizing Comic Cons,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies*. 8. (2020); 9-31. 10.1386/jfs_00007_1.

goods.⁷ Anime cons have a remarkable history, starting as clubs hosting events at a school or hotel.⁸ Fanime started similarly as a meeting of several college-based anime clubs and hosted at California State University, Hayward, in 1994.⁹ Though Fanime has grown into a larger event, it continues to host the staple events outlined above and follows a standardized format in utilizing the physical space to house those events and expand, carried from sci-fi and comic conventions.

I approach this topic utilizing my position as an “aca-fan,” as described by Henry Jenkins as academic-fan researchers who “distinguish themselves from the previous generation by signaling their affiliations with and accountability to the communities they were studying.”¹⁰ Therefore I want to position myself within this study, looking at Fanime and choosing this specific convention as the basis for this thesis. I have extensive experience with Fanime as I initially attended Fanime in 2004 as a young teen and every year therein after 2011. In that time, I experienced the convention as both an attendee from 2004 to 2007 and a staff member from 2008 to 2011. From these positions, I have insight from different perspectives of this particular convention, its layout, organization, growth, and overall functionality. This perspective gives me insight and background to this specific convention that develops a robust contextual knowledge for how the convention has changed, grown, and adapted through the years. Related to the larger main argument of this thesis, the terms “staff” and “attendee” refer to distinct, yet overlapping, groups that exist in a hierarchy of the convention, primarily in terms of engagement and fan labor of the convention. Staff refers to those in the volunteer organization of the convention

⁷ I use capitals for event names as due to these being the official names in Fanime publications.

⁸ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1994 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/465/fanimecon-1994>.

⁹ FanimeCon Forums, *Who started Fanime? Why?* FanimeCon.com, April 2020. <https://forums.fanime.com/index.php/topic,21896.0.html>.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, “AcaFandom and Beyond: Week Two, Part One,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (Blog), 2008-Present, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/06/acafandom_and_beyond_week_two.html.

underneath the larger company that create, organize and facilitate the convention. Their labor and contributions are part of a well-structured ladder from department leaders and other volunteers, where all parts of their work aid the convention. Attendees, on the other hand, fall in the hierarchy underneath the staff as consumers, where their fan labor and production generally comes out through individual production, such as art or cosplay. Before and during the convention, these distinct groups occupy different forms of production, though do have overlap in the concept of fandom where both staff and attendees come to the convention as fans. Furthermore the staff is mostly comprised of attendees that have moved from that experience into staff positions as a way to engage with their fandom. Thus these overlapping groups are connected as fans, but distinct in terms of their production.

While understandably, the convention is based in California and is a single instance and does not represent anime conventions as a whole, I believe the transitional information from a smaller convention to one of the largest on the West Coast serves as an example of a convention in constant development. Thus Fanime offers a well-rounded viewpoint of an anime convention for this thesis. Furthermore, the situation with Fanime and the result of the pandemic ended with the virtual fan-made convention put on by non-staff through online means, including video programming, live streaming, and online chats. As a case-study, Fanime addresses the changes of a long-running convention in the face of an unprecedented pandemic charting the changing engagement and productivity of the attendee fan as a result.

Due to the pandemic in 2020, many large-gathering events canceled in the United States to adhere to the constantly shifting guidelines by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to keep their prospective participants health their first priority. According to the CDC website, initially in early February in 2020 the pandemic numbers were low in the United States which did not call for restrictions on large

events, however later in February with large events such as the Mardi Gras celebration in Louisiana (with around one million gathered), infection rates spiked leading into March, when the first restrictions began.¹¹ On March 11, 2020, WHO assessed that the named COVID-19 virus could be characterized as a pandemic, urging all countries to be immediate and aggressive action against the virus, including dealing with large clusters or community transmission.¹² On March 17, 2020, the CDC updated the Santa Clara County, where San Jose is located, guidelines to state the cancellation of any large-scale events with more than 250 people.¹³ In the constantly shifting COVID-19 guidelines, large event organizers made their decisions based on implementing of social-distancing and lockdown procedures, which often ended in cancellation or postponement due to the increased health risks associated with many people in a communal space.

While Fanime 2020 is one specific example of an anime convention during the pandemic, a lost year of anime conventions began as the pandemic caused a chain reaction in the response of cons of all types when faced with a new global health crisis. Many cons canceled, rescheduled, or deferred abruptly to fit the changing COVID-19 guidelines. However, unlike Fanime, many of these conventions canceled with more time before their event, which led to a difference in time gaps. While not universal, conventions that canceled earlier often hosted staff-created online events. For instance, Anime Expo, one of the largest anime conventions in the US, located in Los Angeles and scheduled for July 2 to 5, 2020, announced to cancel April 17, 2020,

¹¹ Anne Schuchat, "Public Health Response to the Initiation and Spread of Pandemic COVID-19 in the United States, February 24–April 21, 2020," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 7, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6918e2.htm>.

¹² "Listings of WHO's Response to COVID-19," World Health Organization (World Health Organization, June 29, 2020), <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>.

¹³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - Santa Clara County*.

nearly three months before the start of the convention.¹⁴ Similarly, Otakon, a large anime con in Baltimore, announced on April 27, 2020, ahead of their scheduled July 1 to August 2 conference, to cancel their event.¹⁵ As did Crunchyroll Expo 2020, a live expo based around titles available on the streaming service Crunchyroll as well as other components (like panels) that involve big-name industry guests, on June 4 ahead of their September 6 to 8 event in the exact location as Fanime in San Jose.¹⁶ Fanime, however, came to a final decision only around a month before the event. Starting from the first announcement observing the COVID situation on March 6, to the decision to stay open on March 22, 2020, and finally to the deferment announcement on April 13, 2020, left only a month before the con start date of May 22.¹⁷ With the difference in the time frame prior to the events, there was less time to consider virtual options. These announcements sparked heat from the public in the form of Twitter posts, forum posts, and even petitions set up against the convention going on in fear of a public health safety issue initially. After the subsequent deferment, the decision to withhold refunds and instead defer attendees created both relief and anger in the community. When in the context of the pandemic, the intertwined relationship between staff and attendees results in this first interaction where fans acted as organizers due to changes caused by the pandemic. However, looking at this phenomenon requires multiple disciplines and approaches.

¹⁴ “Anime Expo to Return to Los Angeles in 2021,” April 17, 2020, <https://www.anime-expo.org/2020/04/17/anime-expo-return-los-angeles-2021/>.

¹⁵ Otakorp Inc., “Monitoring Novel Coronavirus Concerns for Otakon 2020,” Otakon, March 6, 2020. <https://www.otakon.com/2020/monitoring-novel-coronavirus-2020/>.

¹⁶ Anime News Network, “Crunchyroll Expo 2020 Canceled Due to COVID-19,” Anime News Network, June 6, 2020. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2020-06-04/crunchyroll-expo-2020-canceled-due-to-covid-19/160203>.

¹⁷ Eric Wu, *FanimeCon - FanimeCon 2020 Deferred to 2021*. April 13, 2020. <https://www.fanime.com/news/fanimecon-2020-deferred-to-2021/>.

1.2 Relevant Literature and Studies

Recently there is a surge of scholarship examining conventions as fan events, fan space, and the cultural connections of media interaction, all of which are relevant to the research in this thesis. This work also draws on similar methodologies from anthropology, ethnography, and cultural studies, including participant observation and ethnographic interviews. As this study centralizes on conventions during a pandemic, it requires adaptation to digital platforms. This thesis connects these different yet related methodologies to provide a more comprehensive view of Fanime 2020. Integration of these methodological approaches furthers my argument that due to COVID-19, Fanime's series of announcements and eventual deferral opened the door for fans to organize the virtual stand-in convention by providing a basis for analysis of collected data.

As I use an anthropological methodology of virtual space premised on interviews and questionnaires, Susan Napier's *The World of Anime Fandom in America* (2016) profoundly influences my work. Napier's study examines the "Miyazaki Mailing List," an online fan group devoted to the works of renowned animator Miyazaki Hayao. As a self-proclaimed "lurker," Napier uses participant-observation and survey questionnaires to "discuss the group not only in terms of its status as an Internet community but also in relation to anime fan culture overall" in connection to Japanese "soft power," or non-military influence on other countries.¹⁸ This concept relates to the globalization of anime in terms of the influence of conventions, akin to fan interactivity surrounding that media. Napier writes, "just as fan conventions provide fellowship and solidarity by offering a means for fans to interact in a liminoid space outside their regular

¹⁸ Susan Napier, "The World of Anime Fandom in America," *Mechademia: Second Arc*, 2006 vol. 1 (2006): 47-63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41510877>, 48.

lives, the MML (Miyazaki Mailing List) provides a liminoid virtual space where fans can enjoy the fellowship of others.”¹⁹ Napier's work presents a solid example for the focus on fans. It examines the relationships between fans and their fan-object when placed into a virtual space, just as attendee fans have a deep relationship with Fanime, as explained in depth by interviews later. More specifically, I use Napier's piece to position fandoms as a community and position those fandoms in physical spaces and virtual spaces.

My methodology also draws on ethnographic scholarship that considers the representation of specific cultures or subcultures, sensitive topics, or participants in an uncomfortable position. Eriko Yamato uses traditional ethnographic methodologies, such as those premised on interviews and surveys, and a focus on the researcher's ethical concerns. Yamato offers a valuable perspective through her study on Malaysian fandoms through anime conventions in 2018, where she explores concepts of shame and marginalization for teenaged boys who take part in conventions and the convention community.²⁰ Yamato ensured that her informants' anonymity would be protected and did not use names to cause undue anxiety and potential harm. Additionally, Yamato's work on anime conventions provides a look into existing structures, where they provide contextual information regarding conventions and attendees that are useful to positioning my view into Fanime.²¹ For example, this work influenced my thesis as a study that looked at fan engagement through interviews at the specific site of a physical convention with a similar organization to Fanime. Attendees in Yamato's study have similar

¹⁹ Ibid, 58.

²⁰ Eriko Yamato, "Construction of Discursive Fandom and Structural Fandom through Anime Comics and Game Conventions in Malaysia," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 4 (2018): 469-485.

²¹ Ibid.

feelings towards their convention as those attendees do to Fanime in terms of deep connections from their continued support and interaction with the convention.

This thesis is mainly concerned with the actions of the attendee fan producers working within and outside the Fanime convention model. Accordingly, I seek to understand the changing nature of convention fan spaces, as Benjamin Woo et al. observe in their work on convention research. Woo and his team both use ethnographic data from respondents to gain insight into fan perceptions of comics conventions and account for both fan and industry presence.²² On this basis, Woo et al. touch on the crucial role of conventions as both a cultural and organizational form.²³ Making these distinctions allows for a more centralized definition and a basis for the study's direction, such as the differentiating between “cons” and “trade-shows,” with different models. Woo et al. place fans at conventions into a complex relationship with their media as “producers, sellers, or consumers,” which places fans into defined yet often overlapping categories.²⁴ These categories correspond to the organization and fan engagement through attendees, staff, or industrial groups within the convention space. While fans as attendees generally engage with their media at conventions as consumers and sometimes producers, such as artists or cosplayers, the production of the convention is a staff responsibility. This thesis uses Fanime to look at the shift from where attendee fans move into staff roles. Similarly, as Woo et al. observe the organization of a convention as a practice, my goal is to look at the disruption of that practice at Fanime 2020.

²² Woo et al, “Theorizing Comic Cons,” 14.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 22.

To better situate early and contemporary anime conventions and the relationships between fans, anime, and those conventions within formed communities, I utilize the analysis of the following sources. As Fanime originally began as a meeting of anime clubs, this context provides the historical basis to those clubs, including the globalization of anime and Japanese popular culture into America. The first is Andrew McKevitt's article "You are Not Alone!": Anime and the Globalizing of Anime," where he looks at origins of fan conventions and traces how the consumption of anime, as a product of Japan, prompted the cultural exchange to America.²⁵ To do so, he looks thoroughly at local changes in conjunction with larger global processes, which include factors of anime and contributions of fansubbers.²⁶ Relating his work to the earlier point regarding anime conventions, his assessment considers those early clubs and science fiction conventions as "audience spaces where they could experience mediated cultural exchange" where anime "acts as one tangible illustration of the impact of cultural globalization in the United States."²⁷ This fits into the conception of anime leading to not only clubs, but to groups of producers which later became the first anime conventions. William Tsutsui's book *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* helps contextualize McKevitt's points and provides another viewpoint, including forces of globalization.²⁸ His statement is that they are "significant forums for disseminating Japanese pop," which puts Fanime into the context of globalization.²⁹ Further, he related the idea of the fans as producers and forces of integration of anime and

²⁵ Andrew C. McKevitt, "You Are Not Alone!": Anime and the Globalizing of America," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 34, no. 5 (2010), pp. 893–921., doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00899.x.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ William M. Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, Key Issues in Asian Studies; No. 6 (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2010).

²⁹ Ibid. 45.

manga, where “dedicated and vocal fans have been active in getting manga into public libraries and Japanese animation onto cable television” through activism and more illicit activities such as fansubbing.³⁰ While globalization relates to a multitude of factors from within and outside these fandoms, these perspectives connect Fanime as an anime convention to that idea and other modes of fan production.

Another source, a chapter from the book *Fandom Unbound* titled “Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture” by Lawrence Eng, similarly aims to create not only a history of anime and fandom in the US but discuss the current state of fandom. Eng looks deeply at the history behind conventions and the relationships between fans and conventions with his ethnographic data. From his assertions, he sees fan networks appear both online and offline.³¹ For this thesis, this point is crucial to the fan space of conventions, where – like these fan networks – they move between offline to online spaces. Related to Fanime, this article helps situate the connected network between the physical space of the convention and the eventual virtual fan-made convention. As Eng states, fans have traditionally participated in “shared activities, such as creating fan art, fansubbing, interacting with fans online, attending conventions, or forming anime clubs” which come together as participatory culture and production elements.³² All of the above form a network of fans, but speak to the many ways which fans participate with their media object, and introduce areas to be looked at within this thesis as how fans consume and produce, particularly around anime conventions and specific to the 2020 virtual Fanime.

³⁰ Ibid. 46.

³¹ Eng, “Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture.”

³² Ibid. 166.

Expanding on that idea from participant observation, mixed with the previous ideas of fan interview for my thesis, I turn to *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, by Nicolle Lamerichs as she utilizes traditional and digital fieldwork related to fan membership a participatory culture. For Lamerichs, interview and auto-ethnography are tools to provide a personal context within her informants.³³ This concept is the main staple for my research, especially about working directly with fans at an anime convention. She also makes use of the concept of “aca-fan,”³⁴ which I have also used as a way to position myself within this study. According to Lamerichs, researchers can avoid pitfalls and mistakes if they are personally knowledgeable about the fan culture they are studying.³⁵ Knowledge of the fan culture adds to the trust and rapport between the researcher and their informants and provides contextual information that might be otherwise unknown. Alternatively, the researcher's closeness to the area of study may create a case of blinders, where the focus is too specific to unique attributes rather than a larger picture.³⁶ In recent work, Lamerichs uses an ethnographic methodology for on-site fieldwork. She asks questions regarding her informants’ engagement of cosplay at conventions and thoughts on coming together with other fans in physical through anecdotal, qualitative research from in-person interviews to analyze a single convention event.³⁷ Combined with her awareness and personal experience with cosplay, she bridges her observations with those of her participants to present a composite picture. While this approach does create a single-sided viewpoint, it allows the researcher to move within the space of fans without affecting data

³³ Lamerichs, “Fan Membership: Traditional and Digital Fieldwork,” 50.

³⁵ Ibid, 52.

³⁶ Ibid, 53.

³⁷ Nicolle Lamerichs, “Cosplay: The Affective Mediation of Fictional Bodies,” in *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, edited by Alice Chauvel et al. (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), 123-131.

collection as there is that sense of rapport and belonging. Her perspective uses the concept of good rapport with informants in these fan communities, which I ultimately follow in my research methods from my closeness to Fanime. I relate this work to my thesis as an ethnographic example to studying fans at conventions.

Fans act as the lifeblood to a convention, to interact in different ways and different roles. Early anime clubs and the urge to interact with others are only small pieces of how anime conventions came to be. Within the space of a convention, various groups of people, including the attendee fans that act primarily as consumers, engage with the specified events, though may also produce in the way of contests or interactive events. Running the convention falls to the staff, a large group of dedicated volunteers working in an organized hierarchy to help with the production and creation of the convention annually. For Fanime 2020, the pandemic caused a disruption where the attendee fans moved into a position to produce the virtual convention. Prior to that year, the convention adapted a general organization based on changes made since its creation in 1994 thru 2019. The disruption of 2020 is one never seen prior to this year, where fans stepped into the roles of the producers for their event, mimicking that general organization but existing outside of the staff organization. From these sources, I chart the historical context of the convention, from earlier forces to early fan producers, and connect to fan studies, Japanese studies, and studies of anime conventions to better support the argument of how these fans became the producers during that disruption.

CHAPTER II: HISTORY OF ANIME CONVENTIONS AND THE GENEALOGY OF FANIME

2.1. Rise of Anime Cons: Globalization to Fansubbers and Beyond

To get a better sense of anime conventions, it is helpful to understand the three main factors behind their growth. The first factor is increased access to anime thanks to the globalization of anime through the Japanese government, content industries, and fan efforts, especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The second factor leading to the growth of anime cons was clubs or rings of fansubbers (producer groups that took anime and provided their translations and hard-coded subtitles into tapes to watch or distribute to other fans). Though fansubbers are not new and have been active in subtitling anime since the 1960s, they were among the many fan groups that started small gatherings that became some of the first recognized anime conventions. Third, as I will argue, anime conventions are events centered around fandoms for “Japanese culture,” or how fans perceive Japanese culture from the materials that have globalized, like licensed manga and anime. These factors tie into the larger argument of the current traditional model of anime conventions, which brings together fans into physical spaces.

Globalization of Japanese media is complex and cannot be attributed to a singular instance or linear process. For the sake of this thesis, I concentrate this conception on Japanese popular media to place anime conventions within the context of that globalization, which resulted from many processes. The following observations are not meant to be fully encompassing but to position the genealogy of anime conventions as a part of these globalizing processes. One facet of these processes is to consider them not strictly limited to anime. William Tsutsui uses the example of Godzilla (*Gojira*) films, where he states they satisfied the need for American movie theaters with a stream of constant films in the 1950s and 1960s, as a form of

inexpensive Japanese media that was easily transformable to American audiences.³⁸ From movement from Japan outward, the franchise of Godzilla films in this time are examples of “localization,” or adaptation of that item into another format to fit specific audiences. To better explain, Tsutsui uses Iwabuchi Koichi’s concept of “cultural odor,” or an odor that reflects a certain cultural fragrance, or connotation, to position globalized goods as saleable if that cultural association is removed.³⁹ Anne Allison furthers this concept by use of examples of Japanese exports in technology, quoting the creator of the Sony Walkman, Kuroki Yasuo, who stated that the gray colors and modern aesthetic—as well as the name—were factors intended to limit the Japanese look (a “de-odorizing” of the cultural odor).⁴⁰ To summarize Tsutsui, this localization process became prevalent from the 1960s to the 1980s, with films, video games, and anime.⁴¹ While this process of de-odorizing helped bring Japanese-based media to the United States, it also had limitations in terms of the image of Japan it brought with it. First, it attempted to downplay the Japanese origins in order to situate within an American palette. Second, it ran (and continues to run) the risk of essentialization and generalization of Japanese culture by erasing or censoring certain elements.

It is most important, though, to keep in mind that the above examples show only a piece of the whole picture of globalization, which is not a singular line of progression but rather a network of other elements, leading from the 1950s and into the past few decades. As Mark McLelland states in the Introduction to *The End of Cool Japan!*, in the early 2000s, the concept

³⁸ Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 40.

³⁹ Iwabuchi Koichi, “How ‘Japanese’ is Pokémon?” in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) quoted in Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 42.

⁴⁰ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, Asia--local Studies/global Themes; 13. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 109.

⁴¹ Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 48-50.

of Japan's "coolness" became a common marketing strategy from Japanese businesses and government agencies.⁴² The idea of "cool Japan" as a strategy derives from the concept of "soft power," using Joseph Nye's definition (as quoted by McLelland) of a non-military way to create a positive interest and exert influence to and of one's culture.⁴³ While the strategy gained steam during the early 2000s, McLelland cautiously warns of its implications, including issues of essentializing and othering of Japan and the legal ramifications and fan's access to that media.⁴⁴ In regards to anime, while earlier localization and later "cool Japan" strategy efforts helped to establish mainstay titles, the edited and translated versions caused frustration for some fans due to limitations and long lag times from Japanese to American release dates, a continual point of frustration from the 1960s.⁴⁵ Thus, fans turned to alternative methods, which later connected to other manifestations of anime fandom, such as anime clubs and fansubbers.

Understanding the genealogy of large anime cons centered around the globalized Japanese media products helps to understand their roots in niche clubs. Kevin McKeivitt writes that the first anime club began in Los Angeles in 1977 and was founded by fans of the 1960s and 1970s anime, including licensed, localized titles such as *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*, first aired in the United States in 1963), *Speed Racer* (*Mach GoGoGo*, first aired in the United States in 1967) or *Gigantor* (*Tetsujin-28 go*, first aired in the United States 1964).⁴⁶ Tsutsui has described the history of anime cons in the 1980s and writes that these fan gatherings acted as "agents of

⁴² Mark McLelland, *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, Routledge Contemporary Japan Series; 65. (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ McKeivitt, "You Are Not Alone!"; Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 12.

globalization,” forming from “do-it-yourself initiatives,” and promoted Japanese anime before content industries, television networks, and other corporate interests were doing so.⁴⁷ He describes these groups as “dedicated admirers of anime” that “were indispensable in bringing the latest creations of Japanese animators to international audiences” through means of anime clubs and groups.⁴⁸ As Anne Allison writes, prior to the 1990s, Japan was largely viewed as an outsourcer of culture that would then be localized. Due to the imbalance of the yen against the U.S. dollar, American television networks could purchase Japanese anime for cheap, dub them, and use them as cheap filler on U.S. television program schedules.⁴⁹ Tsutsui writes that many U.S. viewers, primarily children, watched these Japanese programs for the “campy” special effects and because they seemed different from programs offered by Disney that filled the US airwaves since 1954. Yet several of these series achieved loyal adult fans, who were attracted to anime’s complex narrative styles and character types (for example, the ambiguity between good and evil and flawed protagonists, not to mention oversexualized female characters) that were not prevalent in U.S. cartoons.⁵⁰ Fan communities also developed around particular franchises. For example, according to McKevitt, *Star Blazers* (another name for the dubbed *Space Battleship Yamato* anime series released in 1979), became “a watershed for anime in the United States, serving as the first series to entice fans to learn more about other Japanese animated shows” after gaining attention.⁵¹ Fans then moved between fandoms based around a wide variety of media and other goods, as well as these specific franchises coming out of Japan.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 16.

⁴⁹ Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ McKevitt, ““You Are Not Alone!”” 903.

Demonstrating Henry Jenkin's notion that “fans produce communities,” some anime fan groups acted as fansubbers and circulated anime without permission from rights holders and distributors in a push to have greater access to “authentic” Japanese anime and produce their communities.⁵² Matched with changing technology, unofficial versions of Japanese products spread further, where fans took on “active roles as mediators and distributors,” taking more control of their distribution and access to anime.⁵³ For example, around 1989, many fansubbers copied videotapes of anime series and circulated them for free outside of copyrights.⁵⁴ However, as Alisa Freedman argues, some fans became unintentional pirates out of their goal to promote communities through which to discuss their favorite series; thus the goal of most fans was not to violate copyrights but to expand their viewership in the United States for purposes other than making money.⁵⁵ As McKeivitt furthers, “fans are expected to cease distributing Japan-only anime once a U.S. company purchases the North American distribution rights.”⁵⁶ However, Japanese publishing companies have sued fansubbers for copyright infringement and illegally circulated unlicensed texts and media.⁵⁷

⁵² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, *Studies in Culture and Communication*, (New York: Routledge, 1992); This use of the term authentic is taken from the McKeivitt article, as he explains that authenticity was an element that fans sought for titles only available in Japan, with limited censoring and generally subtitled rather than dubbed.

⁵³ McLelland, *End of Cool Japan*.

⁵⁴ Sean Leonard, “Celebrating Two Decades of Unlawful Progress: Fan Distribution, Proselytization Commons, and the Explosive Growth of Japanese Animation,” *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, (2005) 189–265.

⁵⁵ Alisa Freedman, “Death Note, Student Crimes, and the Power of Universities in the Global Spread of Manga,” in *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Mark McLelland, Routledge Contemporary Japan Series; 65. (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 31-50.

⁵⁶ McKeivitt, “You Are Not Alone!”

⁵⁷ Rafael Antonio Pineda, “Kodansha Wins 160-Million-Yen Lawsuit Against 3 Pirate Site Admins,” Anime News Network, (Anime News Network, November 21, 2019), <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2019-11-21/kodansha-wins-160-million-yen-lawsuit-against-3-pirate-site-admins/.153486>.

Ironically some fansubbing groups that were once illegal, like Crunchyroll, became major platforms for legally globalizing anime and some of the main sponsors of anime cons. As highlighted by an article in 2007, Crunchyroll was “getting money for copyrighted anime content uploaded to the site (much of which were uploaded by the site owners) [that] plainly violates the DMCA,” where the structure relied heavily on contributions of fansubs.⁵⁸ However, in January 2009, the company went legal, making contractual agreements with large anime industry names, such as Fuji TV, and began offering their services as a streaming site with availabilities for free (with advertisements) or premium (without advertisement) options.⁵⁹ This shift from a fan-made production of pirate fansubs to a legitimate business with contractual connections is an example of shifting movements of fan production. While the example of fansubbers supports the idea of fans taking control of their production, which exemplifies Sam Leonard’s assertion that, “the rise of clubs, industry, and fansubbing gave rise to anime conventions: gatherings where fans and newcomers alike could revel in fansubbed and licensed anime.”⁶⁰

Thanks to fansubbing communities, and related fandubbers of anime, fan clubs were able to gain access to some anime through unlicensed means. These clubs also played a social function and provided chances for collective viewing. As Eng writes, “in addition to providing a social atmosphere where fans could watch anime together, they played an important role in educating the fandom about the diversity of anime beyond what was commercially available.”⁶¹ Therefore globalization, interest, and fan groups pushed anime into American fan spaces and

⁵⁸ Chris Morrison, “Crunchyroll, for Pirated Anime Content,” *Venturebeat.com* (Venture Beat, September 6, 2007), <https://venturebeat.com/2007/09/06/crunchyroll-for-pirated-anime-content/>.

⁵⁹ Forbes, “Now Playing: Anime Online,” *Forbes.com* (Forbes, August 5, 2009), <https://www.forbes.com/2009/08/04/online-anime-video-technology-e-gang-09-japan.html?sh=734fc5a8576a>.

⁶⁰ Leonard, “Fan Distribution.”

⁶¹ Eng, “Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture.”

markets. Additionally, conventions offered spaces for anime fans to congregate. For example, Bay Con, one of the longest-running sci-fi conventions in San Francisco, in 1986 held an eighty-hour anime marathon.⁶² The famous San-Diego International Comic-Con, established in 1970, became “a site for fans to purchase physical collectibles as well as to gather information on their favorite media objects” and included different media as part of this commercialization process, such as comics, science fiction, movies, franchises, and, since the 1980s, anime.⁶³ These conventions were large-scale fan events that generally included features related to anime, such as video programming and cosplay (dressing up as a character from a series). These larger conventions, which encompassed many different fandoms, exemplify what Toshio Okada states where fans “have a tendency to share the attitude where even though what [they] like is different, [they] are all fans.”⁶⁴ Though these convention spaces correlate to their specific media-objects (like comic books or sci-fi), the inclusion of other media opened these spaces to increasing fandoms. However, this also led to certain fandoms looking for their specified events.

It is generally believed that the first American anime convention was either Yamato-con (1983, Dallas, Texas), named after the popular anime *Space Battleship Yamato* (*Uchū Senkan Yamato*) first aired in 1978, or Project A-Kon (1990, Dallas, Texas), named after the anime film series *Project A-Ko* (*Purojekuto Ēko*) started in 1986.⁶⁵ I consider Yamato-con the first as it was

⁶² McKevitt, “You Are Not Alone!,” 911.

⁶³ Yamato, “Construction of discursive fandom.”

⁶⁴ Okada Toshi, *オタクはすでに死んでいる* (*Otaku ha sude ni shindeiru*) *Otaku are Already Dead*, (Tokyo : Shinchōsha, 2008). Translation by author; In his book, Okada is looking at *otaku* culture, or fan culture, within Japan, though makes many comparisons and connections to international fandoms and view of *otaku* culture from the outside. This emphasis is to reiterate the idea that while fans exist for different specific objects, they still come together as fans.

⁶⁵ As most anime conventions, they take their names from elements of Japanese popular culture, in this case anime, though other conventions use Japanese words (like Otakon, which is a hybrid of the Japanese word *otaku* and “kon” for convention).

not only a gathering to share in Japanese culture, but since it had an area with a dealer's hall, video programming, and a fee at the door, which are all elements of an anime convention. According to fandom archive sources, as supplemented by the anime con archive animecons.com, Yamato-con began by fandoms for *Space Battleship Yamato*, particularly a fan club called "Earth Defense Command."⁶⁶ It was a one-day, paid event to share the love of *Space Battleship Yamato* and attracted around one hundred attendees and eight dealers.⁶⁷ Programming included showing all twenty-six episodes of the series, an unidentified film of the series, and a dealer's hall selling models and books based on *Space Battleship Yamato*.⁶⁸ Anime clubs later organized and staffed other conventions across the United States. For example, the "members of Cal-Animage Alpha, the University of California, Berkeley anime club, founded Anime Expo in 1992, which became one of the largest anime trade conventions in the United States."⁶⁹ Fanime owes its creation to a similar club event that started in the early 1990s. To better understand how the convention has changed, especially in the context of the 2020 pandemic, in the following section, I observe the convention history and organization of Fanime, keeping in mind how its origins are similar to the other early cons I have described above while acknowledging distinctive growth patterns.

⁶⁶ Dave Merril, *Star Blazer Chronicles: Yamatocon!*, Cosmo DNA, June 6, 2013, Accessed 2021. <https://ourstarblazers.com/vault/317/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Eng, "Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture," 163.

2.2 A Long History of Fanime

To analyze Fanime in the context of this lost year of 2020, in this section, I provide both historical and personal accounts of the convention's growth. Fanime is one of the largest anime conventions in California, located in San Jose, CA, with over 30,000 attendees in the few years before 2020.⁷⁰ In 2019, the convention celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, celebrating its growth from humble beginnings into a powerhouse of the anime con scene.⁷¹ This history accounts for origins out of anime clubs, early fan producers, and the various changes in the convention over the years. Like the fansubbing groups created their own translated anime, anime clubs and groups created conventions oriented to anime and Japanese culture. As a basis for understanding the changes in 2020, this history contextualizes those changes and highlights the staff organization to later contrast with the fan organization behind the virtual convention. My account of the historical origins of FanimeCon is stitched together from information found in old program guides, con reports, attendance trackers, Wikipedia pages, online Fanime discussion forums, and archived on now-defunct websites of anime clubs.

My personal experience with Fanime began in 2004 when I first attended, and I continued as an attendee until 2007. In 2008, I started as a staff member of the newsletter staff, under the Publications department, as a writer, where my role was to provide articles prior to the convention about events to come and acting as an in-person reporter of events while at the convention. With my other staff members, we supplied information of the con events each day of the convention as a way to report on events and informed others that may have missed events or happenings at the convention. In 2009 I moved into a new department called Content as department head, where I lead a team that supplied all of the written content for newsletters, the

⁷⁰ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2019 Attendance*.

⁷¹ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2019*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2019).

website, and program guides. During this time, I worked closely with my team, overseeing and creating newsletters and helping arrange written content as needed, which required extensive hours before and during the convention. I retired after the 2011 Fanime convention. While my experience with the convention is not exhaustive and indicates a single experience with the convention, I want to be transparent of that experience and, thus, potential bias. Therefore, the following information is from my experiences and various public sources available online, from con reports to attendance data and physical records – such as old program guides or schedules.

2.2.1 Origins and Early Years

The first Fanime was held on June 19, 1994, at California State University (CSU) Hayward and resulted from fan production and labor.⁷² Multiple anime clubs, including No-Name Anime, Foothill ANIME (later Foothill Anime), Chabot Anime, and Beefbowl Anime, organized the first Fanime.⁷³ As an attendee at the first Fanime stated on the official Fanime discussion forums, the first FanimeCon—the F standing for “Free” as in “Free Anime Con”—was a one-day event sponsored by the collaboration of these multiple anime clubs.⁷⁴ This fact is most often repeated, even on a little-known Japanese-language news forum that reports on anime conventions happening in the United States, ani-ensei.net, where it states that the convention began as a meeting of different clubs in 1994.⁷⁵ At CSU Hayward, the clubs put on the event

⁷² AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1994 Attendance*.

⁷³ No-Name Anime, *About, No-Name Anime*, December 18, 2013. http://www.nnanime.com/nn_info.html; *Foothill Anime! Foothill Anime*. Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://web.archive.org/web/20000620195050/http://foothill.anime.net/>; *FanimeCon XV-Illustration Collection*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2009).

⁷⁴ FanimeCon Forums, *Who started Fanime? Why?*

⁷⁵ ani-ensei.net, “FanimeCon 2020 が、新型コロナウイルスの影響で 2021 年 5 月に延期（実質中止）。” せーあに遠征, April 14, 2020. <https://ani-ensei.net/n20200414-fanimecon/>. Translated by author.

with a small dealer's room and had anime showings, along with an animated music video (AMV) contest. From data tracked by AnimeCons.com, the attendance for the first convention hovered around two hundred attendees, most of whom were college-age and members of their respective clubs.⁷⁶ According to attendees, the different club groups came together to set up multiple rooms for showings, notably premiering an uncut, subtitled version of the *Tenchi Muyo!: Mihoshi Special: Galaxy Police Mihoshi's Space Adventure (Tenchi Muyō! Bangai-hen: Uchū Keiji Mihoshi Ginga Daibōken*, unknown if fansubbed or otherwise), which had come out in Japan only a few months prior.⁷⁷ Unconfirmed remarks from the Fanime forums suggest that Frederick Schodt, author of books about comics and manga, was the guest of honor that year.⁷⁸ These club organizations acted as producers for this first Fanime, coming from a background of appreciation for Japanese animation. While not specifically fansubbers, the club No-Name website states, “our goal was to show only subtitled or dubbed anime,” and boasted premieres of such anime as *Please Save My Earth (Boku no Chikyū o Mamotte*, 1986). Thus, these clubs acted as sites for mutual viewing, which led to this first structured Fanime as an official one-day gathering. Similarly, the 1995 Fanime took place in the same location, but the meeting switched locations to Foothill College in 1996.⁷⁹

The 1996 Fanime was another coming together of four clubs. As stated on the No-Name Anime club website, “No-Name was, in fact, one of the four clubs that helped to start Fanime in ‘96, and had a staff member on Fanime's board until 2001”; No-Name further explains that they

⁷⁶ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1994 Attendance.*; FanimeCon Forums, *Who started Fanime? Why?*

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1995 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/362/fanimecon-1995>.

helped with the production and printing of convention badges until 2000.⁸⁰ The year 1996 marked the first time the convention began selling tickets for the event, which shifted from the free festival model in years prior. From 1996 to 1998, the convention was held at Foothill College, and the attendance grew from 775 to 1,700 people.⁸¹ During this time, the convention had other changes, including increased industry guests, the addition of another day of events, with the entry fee of \$25 for both days.⁸² There was a new emphasis to the con: founders created the tagline “The Anime Festival for the Fans” in 1997, and the stated purpose was “to help people learn about and share their interest in Japanese animation.”⁸³ Thus attendance started to branch out from just anime club members and enthusiasts and began to pull in other areas of the fandom.

In 1999, Fanime moved to a new location, the San Jose Wyndham Hotel, with additional events at the Santa Clara Convention Center. With a new third day to its events, the attendance spiked up to 2000 attendees from March 19 to 21.⁸⁴ According to a verified attendee con report, the main events for Friday were the Opening Ceremonies, an event to introduce the con and guests, and the start of a weekend-long anime quiz show. On Saturday, they held their cosplay “Masquerade,” a showcase held on a stage to show off cosplay outfits, a second-round to the anime quiz show, *taiko* drumming, question and answer panels with invited industry guests, and a special live performance from Mari Iijima, (a well-known voice actor for Lynne Minmay, the main female lead from the original *Macross* series) one of the first voice actor guests they had

⁸⁰ No-Name Anime, *About*.

⁸¹ AnimeCon, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1998 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/464/fanimecon-1998>.

⁸² *Ibid*.

⁸³ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1997 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/466/fanimecon-1997>.

⁸⁴ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 1999 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/467/fanimecon-1999>.

directly from Japan.⁸⁵ On Sunday, fans hosted panels, such as “Anime for Beginners,” while guests ran more question and answer panels.⁸⁶ Other notable events, as mentioned in the con report, were the video programming rooms (which showed anime and various Hong Kong films as a way to promote more Asian influence and media) and art show, where artists could display their art, as well as the karaoke room and the Dealer’s Hall.⁸⁷

In 2000, Fanime moved from the hotel to the Santa Clara Convention Center for a larger space for their growing attendee base, estimated to be around 2,300 participants (not including staff).⁸⁸ The same convention report website states that the convention expanded some of the 1999 events, such as the Masquerade and Dealer’s Hall, and added new areas and events.⁸⁹ Additions included an “Artist Alley” where “you were sure to find a couple of artists who’d be very willing to draw you a few nice pieces,” for money, and a Gaming Room, which included free play areas and hosted tournaments on available consoles and television sets.⁹⁰ With increased attendance came long lines in popular areas, like the Dealer’s Hall where attendees were “eager to catch all the goods before their opponents”; according to the convention report, getting a premium place in line certainly paid off well for some of these fans in terms of having

⁸⁵ Mari Iijima is an established Japanese musician with many single releases from 1993 up through 2020. However, she is most famous as the original voice actor and singing voice for Lynne Minmay, the main character of *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross* and *Macross: Do you remember love?*

⁸⁶ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon99 Miscellaneous Events*, Linus Lam Network News. Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime99/fc99misc.htm>.

⁸⁷ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon99 Dealer's Room*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime99/fc99dealers.htm>.

⁸⁸ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2003 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/15/fanimecon-2003>.

⁸⁹ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2K Dealer's Room*. Linus Lam Network News. Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2000/fc2kdeal1.htm>.

⁹⁰ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2K Gaming*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2000/fc2kgames.htm>.

the first run at some exclusive goods.⁹¹ With the long lines, the amount of attendees were growing, as was the interest in anime merchandise and other Japanese goods.

These changes continued from 2001 to 2003, while attendance continued to grow steadily, reaching 5,400 in 2003.⁹² In those three years, panels opened to exchange information about subjects about Japanese culture, travel, and anime-related industries, like Bandai (manufacturer of toys and models to go along with anime franchises and part of anime's larger multi-media mix).⁹³ The convention opened up more space for industry and contracts between large companies involved with similar fandoms with these changes. Holding the con at a multi-room convention center meant that more scheduled panels could be held simultaneously. Staff established additional events in these years, including the Guest Reception, Swap Meet, and Masquerade Contest (all added in 2001); the Trading Post in 2002; and GakuFest (musical performances, the name "Gaku" from the Japanese *ongaku*—meaning music) the Internet Lounge in 2003.⁹⁴ The admission fee for the entire event costs \$35 if purchased by December 2002, \$25 per day for badges purchased at the door.⁹⁵ This year marked the first use of the "By Fans, For Fans" tagline, discussed above, though it was the final year at the Santa Clara Convention Center.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2K Miscellaneous Oddities*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2000/fc2kmisc.htm>.

⁹² AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2003 Attendance*.

⁹³ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2001 Saturday Panels 1*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2001/panel-sat1.htm>.

⁹⁴ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2003 Convention Extras*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2003/constuff.htm>.

⁹⁵ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2003 Attendance*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

2.2.2. *Fanime After 2004: Establishing a Convention Presence*

In 2004, Fanime moved to their current home at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center in downtown San Jose, when I first started attending this anime con. Changes in the convention were not just the overall layout due to the new venue but also included an additional day and the standardization of Memorial Day weekend as the annual date. (Before, the con had held at various dates, including February and June). Admission fees for the entire event were staggered, ranging from \$35 if purchased before the end of December 2003, \$45 by March 31, 2004, and \$55 for badges purchased at the door.⁹⁷ The venue included large exhibition halls and smaller video rooms, with panels placed in one of the connected hotels, the San Jose Marriot. The con utilized other areas, including walkways, where gaming consoles and Artist Alley tables were placed along walls near columns. The Masquerade event and contest and the MusicFest (a concert event adapted from the previous years' GakuFest) were held at the Civic Auditorium, a stage directly across the street from the convention center. That years' musical guests included the bands BLOOD and Camino, both of which had increasing fans in the often-overlapping Jrock fandoms at the time and provided music for anime soundtracks.⁹⁸ Fanime 2004 marked the tenth anniversary and the start of a stable configuration, layout, and organization style upon which subsequent Fanime cons would be built.

For example, Fanime 2005 kept the same general layout and prices, including \$55 at the door for the whole weekend.⁹⁹ However, the attendance rates increased significantly to around 8,300 paid attendees, though 10,000 people were present at and around the convention, with non-

⁹⁷ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2004 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/182/fanimecon-2004>.

⁹⁸ Linus Lam, *Linus Lam's Coverage of FanimeCon2004 Guests of Honor*, Linus Lam Network News, Accessed April 29, 2021, <http://www.usagichan2.com/Fanime2004/guests.htm>.

⁹⁹ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2005 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/623/fanimecon-2005>.

attendees in the free spaces of the convention, like the cosplay gatherings in the front of the convention center and the walkways of the main building.¹⁰⁰ Another significant change was the adoption of con mascots and annual con themes. Where earlier versions of Fanime had pirate themes, in honor of the sound of the parent company initials ARG (Anime Resource Group), 2005 was the first use of a specific yearly theme: “Students and the City” and the debut of mascots, Elliot, Damon, Amber, Becky and Candy, drawn in Japanese anime styles and included on con-themed art, logos, and merchandise.¹⁰¹ Attendance at the 2006 Fanime, with the theme “Cyber Meets Punk” (punning on cyberpunk anime), swelled to around 10,000 paid attendees.¹⁰² Cyberpunk anime was prevalent through popular titles such as *Akira* (1988) and the *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku Kidōtai*) franchise, including films and series (1995-2020), which Fanime utilized primarily in their artwork, but also with events and video programming geared towards the cyberpunk genre. During these years, Fanime increased its number of convention rooms and made layout changes to accommodate the increasing number of participants. The organizers also added an Arcade Room with the E-Gaming (to encompass all gaming types) and Swap Meet areas meshed together, rather than having the games strewn through the main thoroughfare.¹⁰³ Likewise, where panel rooms and video rooms had been placed mainly within the convention space and the adjacent San Jose Marriot, new video rooms were added to the Hilton San Jose, the other connected hotel opposite the Marriot.¹⁰⁴ Artist Alley booths moved from where they had

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *FanimeCon XV-Illustration Collection*; Themes are a not a unique characteristic to Fanime, as other conventions also utilize annual themes such as Anime Expo (see <https://www.anime-expo.org> for an example).

¹⁰² AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2006 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/841/fanimecon-2006>.

¹⁰³ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2006*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

been on the second-floor main walkway and were placed together in an exhibit hall. Fanime placed “Stage Zero,” a new centralized event space and programming area with seating and a stage that later became the main exhibition stage, in the now open space.¹⁰⁵ Otherwise, the area remained the same configuration with the convention center, hotels, and the Civic Center across the street.

Moving forward, Fanime 2007, with a theme of “2007 Space Odyssey”, an ode to space and sci-fi anime, similarly attracted around 10,000 attendees.¹⁰⁶ Fanime added extra events that became essential features of the con, including the Black-and-White Cosplay Masquerade Ball (later called the Black and White Ball) and the FaniMaid Café (a reference to Japanese “maid cafés,” cafés in Japan where primarily women dressed in French maid costumes wait on male customers and a feature of areas of Tokyo associated with anime, such as Akihabara, discussed in global media at the time).¹⁰⁷ These events resulted from different manifestations of Japanese culture, including cosplay and the maid cafes known in Akihabara. The Black and White Ball was a designated dance space where cosplayers could dance to all sorts of Japanese music, including anime music. At the same time, the FaniMaid Café acted as a Maid Café, where attendees could sit at tables with women dressed in French maid costumes, playing games, and eating an assortment of small confectionary treats. Additionally, the convention hosted an Asian Food Court in conjunction with the already available convention center concessions as a way to connect to its Japanese roots.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2007, Attendance* <https://animecons.com/events/info/1114/fanimecon-2007>.

¹⁰⁷ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2007*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Additionally, in 2008, Fanime settled on the theme of “Feudal Japan” and added Japanese outfits to their official art and language to Program Guide as “ファニメコン” (*Fuanimekon*). Visually, the new theme showed the human mascots in interpreted, fantasy-versions of feudal clothing, including a samurai, *taiko* drummer, a *kunoichi* (female ninja), and women clad in kimono. These representations were matched with a program guide essay by prolific guest Gilles Poitras, a writer for anime and Japanese culture, outlining a brief Japanese history from 1185 to 1868 and highlighting anime that takes place in those historical settings.¹⁰⁹ Another element, particular to the addition of the samurai imagery and historical references, ties to the prevalence and popularity of samurai films like those shown at the convention, like the western-esque, samurai-inspired film *Sukiyaki Western Django* (*Sukiyaki Uesutan Jango*, 2007).¹¹⁰ This connection to history and anime for the convention illustrates a convergence between the media behind the convention, its historical and cultural roots, and the fans who enjoy it. With nearly 14,000 attendees, the convention had doubled in size from 2004, and the increase drove events to get larger, reaching other areas of fandom and more hours within the convention.¹¹¹ Firstly, the convention’s MusicFest saw an increase in the number of bands; in 2008, An Café (Antic Café), a popular Visual-kei band from Japan, headlined.¹¹² Secondly, Stage Zero became more of an

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2008 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/1394/fanimecon-2008>.

¹¹² “Visual-kei” meaning “visual-style” and a type of fashion that comes out of musical genre which has varied visual styles, integrating themes like glam rock, punk and traditional Japanese forms like kabuki theater. The band *X Japan* is considered the pioneer of the genre in 1982, but the style was prevalent in bands through the 90s and into the 2000s as well. Many of these bands sing openings for different anime, and have fans based on those specific songs as well their own fandoms based around specific bands or visual-kei styles. For more basic information, but by no means the full story, see a consolidated history here Bunny Bissoux, “The Story of Visual Kei,” *Time Out Tokyo* (Time Out, June 11, 2015), <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/music/the-story-of-visual-kei>; *FanimeCon Program Guide 2008*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2008).

epicenter with new “StageZero @ Night” programming, allowing for a centralized twenty-four-hour space for con-goers. These changes started to shift the overall trajectory of the convention, including more time and space, which also meant the staff presence and utilization shifted to accommodate the growing attendance numbers.

Over 14,000 attendees, Fanime's music-themed convention of 2009 made various adjustments to its scheduling and space to serve the attendees better.¹¹³ The biggest change was the use of the Fairmont Hotel, a large hotel about a block away from the convention center, to host two events: the Black and White Ball (now a staple of the convention) and the Yamaga Guest Party, a new exclusive event for attendees to mingle with guests, hosted in 2009 by long-time guest Hiroyuki Yamaga, the Executive Director of Gainax, (an influential animation studio in Japan famous for the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* [*Shinseiki Evangerion*] in 1995).¹¹⁴ As they were hosting Hiroyuki Yamaga, Fanime also showed the highly anticipated *Gurren Lagann* film “Gurren Hen,” from their newer anime titled *Gurren Lagann* (*Tengen Toppa Guren Ragan*, 2007), which had aired in September 2008 in Japan.¹¹⁵ The main musical guest was Halko Mamoi, an “idol” (a form of Japanese celebrity who performs more than one talent, often singing, dancing, and acting, and is accessible to their fans), from Akihabara (Tokyo neighborhood known for its prevalence of anime, manga, and game shops), and other bands for MusicFest.¹¹⁶ This year also introduced the event known as “The Dojo,” put on by the

¹¹³ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2009 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/1619/fanimecon-2009>.

¹¹⁴ The event was limited and advertised as a party capped at 100 attendees, where Press and Industry badges were not allowed. Tickets to the event were prizes, given at Stage Zero, and an item in the annual charity auction at random intervals. At the event, food was served, and attendees could mingle among guests of honor, including animators from GAINAX.

¹¹⁵ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2009*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2009).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

FanimeCon Bushido Department that covered the performance and history of martial arts from Japan and beyond (i.e., kung-fu from China) and through workshops, demonstrations, and panels.¹¹⁷ Thus as Fanime grew larger, more Japanese cultural events were included in the Fanime schedule and had their own designated spaces for attendees to interact together. In 2010, the price at the door increased to \$60, and the convention saw 16,000 attendees.¹¹⁸ Although the theme shifted to RPG (tabletop role-playing game), the main events of Fanime remained the same, including similar guests, such as Halko Mamoi, and the addition of LM.C, a duo band from Japan set to perform for MusicFest.¹¹⁹ A new event for adults, the Rum Party, opened with pirate-themed games and events (referencing the original Fanime organizing company name) geared towards the nighttime crowd aged twenty-one and older.¹²⁰

Out of all of the Fanime cons that I attended, the one that changed the most was the 2011 Steampunk-themed Fanime with nearly 21,000 attendees.¹²¹ The theme was tied into panel events from both fans and hosted by the Steam Federation, a steampunk enthusiast group from the Bay Area.¹²² Those events included a new panel called “Steampunk in Anime” which looked at the steampunk aesthetic (a genre that emphasizes steam-powered technology and Victorian-era fashion) used in anime and manga throughout the years. While the genre is not a new concept, it is often employed in science fiction or fantasy media, like Hayao Miyazaki’s popular *Laputa*:

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2010 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/2059/fanimecon-2010>.

¹¹⁹ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2010*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2010).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2011 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/2258/fanimecon-2011>.

¹²² *FanimeCon Program Guide 2011*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2011).

Castle in the Sky (Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta, 1986), which uses fantasy and technology elements. Spatially, the convention moved to more hotel areas to support the growing attendance. However, the most significant change I witnessed as a staff member was the absence of printed schedules for attendees, which caused a huge stir and change in my department. The convention opted to use online versions of schedules and information desks as centralized hubs. Several attendees were confused by this change and caused communication issues for events, such as cosplay gatherings and other fan-run events; attendees were unaware of the times and thus were unable to participate. As I worked in Content at the time, I printed some large event times in the newsletters as an alternative way to get some information out, despite never having done so prior. It was an example of how, even as staff, we changed our production habits based on changes of the convention to accommodate for such a change. It was the only year in Fanime's history since 2004 when printed schedules were not available. This mishap was a major point of contention, though it did not deter the large attendee presence.

My experience with Fanime since 2004 changed drastically. I was fourteen when I first attended Fanime. Then, I stuck most closely to the Dealer's Hall and anime video rooms. Later, between 2008 and 2011, I worked with content and official reporting of con events in newsletters. As an attendee, I attended all exhibit halls and experienced the changing Dealer's Hall, Gaming Hall, and Artist Alley. I also took part in the Swap Meet to sell older anime goods and attended various fan panels about popular anime. One of my favorite events was the Game Show, as they gave exclusive prizes and the format constantly changed, from a Jeopardy-style to a Family Feud, which I attempted to take part in every year during my attendance. I also frequented the Charity Auction, with other limited goods ranging from anime to comics and beyond, with the proceeds going towards a local charity. As staff, I worked underneath the Publications department, at first as a writer for the newsletters in 2008, then as the Content

Department Head from 2009-2011, where I oversaw and led staff to write before and at-con newsletters, helped write for the program guides and assisted with the official website. As I still attended similar panels and events to report on them to the newsletters, my experience varied. Still, I spent time editing and printing at the convention for interested readers.

The convention transitions in this time show an evolving model much larger than that of the pre-2004 model that relied on anime clubs and a small organization. Instead, the model is ever-evolving during this time to include a solidified structure from both event programming and staff organization (to be expanded later). As more events pulled in overlapping fandoms and interests, the attendance grew due to increased programming coupled with spatial changes. At this time, the main producers of the convention were staff members, though increases in attendance influenced additional events. It exhibits a remark made by Nicolle Lamerichs regarding this dichotomy, where the groups “often show similar motivations and dispositions” but that “these roles must not be confused.”¹²³ In this case, while the volunteer staff and attendee fans share in the mutual enjoyment of the con, their roles and interactions with the convention are separate. Going forward, the inclusion of additional events to account for other fandoms and increasing numbers, as well as changes in the convention model through a new partnership and a change to the staff organization through an event organization that goes back to the roots of the “By Fans, For Fans” ideology.

2.2.3 Fanime After 2012: Increased Attendance and Changing Model

In 2012, Fanime settled on a sports theme, likely in conjunction with the 2012 London Olympics in the summer after the convention. Twenty-one thousand people attended the

¹²³ Lamerichs, *Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence*.

convention and enjoyed similar staple events as the years prior with the addition of panels based around an increase of popularity for sports anime, a genre usually associated with depictions of sports and sports clubs in Japan.¹²⁴ Fanime also partnered with the steampunk-centric convention Clockwork Alchemy, which took place in the DoubleTree Hotel offsite from Fanime with assistance and advertising from the larger convention. In 2013, attendance grew beyond 23,000 people, which meant logistical and organizational changes to accommodate such a large amount of people and compensate for the ongoing construction to the front of the convention center.¹²⁵ Some of the changes included the move of registration and badge pickup to the Fairmont Hotel, out of the convention center in an attempt to alleviate the usual long lines.¹²⁶ Under the theme of “Gothic Fairytales,” the tradition of themed events and cosplay gatherings continued. Family-oriented rooms were added, including New Mom Rooms, advertised as family-friendly, lockable rooms for new mothers needing a private space for new babies or young children’s needs, and Parent Lounge.¹²⁷ Another new feature was a shuttle service to help with longer travel times, especially with their affiliate Clockwork Alchemy taking place in a hotel away from the convention center. The twentieth anniversary, Fanime 2014, changed only slightly through the use of a beach theme and expansion both in terms of area of the convention and attendees; however, for the first time, outside parties did not officially track the attendance due to the merger between FanimeCon and Clockwork Alchemy for the year.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2012 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/2795/fanimecon-2012>; *FanimeCon Program Guide 2012*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2012).

¹²⁵ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2013 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/3480/fanimecon-2013>.

¹²⁶ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2013*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2013).

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ AnimeCons, *Ten Largest North American Anime Conventions of 2014*, AnimeCons.com. 2014, <https://animecons.com/news/post/1478/ten-largest-north-american-anime-conventions-of-2014>.

For the next three years, the convention would not have official attendance numbers reported but continued to grow. In 2015, the theme shifted to Japanese mythology, which included imagery of Japanese mythological creatures, including *yōkai*, or Japanese monsters and creatures “of folkloric expression and communication.”¹²⁹ Using their mascots, Fanime utilized imagery of these *yōkai*, such as the use of the character Candy as a kitsune, or fox, which is often depicted as a trickster character in Japanese folklore through transformation, though it has strong ties to the worship of Inari, the god of the rice field.¹³⁰ Other character designs were of other creatures deeply connected to Japanese folklore and mythology, including two dressed as dragons, the another as an oni (demon or ogre), and the last as a rabbit from the moon.¹³¹ Through the outfits of the mascots, the artist and fans interpret these ideas from folklore and mythology as a connection to Japan. In *The Book of Yokai*, Michael Foster explains the prominent use of *yōkai* is due to “the long and intimate relationship of local places, folklore, and history with art, literature, and popular culture,” which he goes on to explain as considerable presence in contemporary culture.¹³² This theme reflects those deeper connections to Japanese culture, but also the prominent usage of these images in anime as well, including the popular *Yōkai Watch* (*Yōkai Wotchi*), an anime about a young boy that must find and capture different *yōkai*, which started in 2014, as well as imagery to earlier anime such as *InuYasha*, 1996, an anime about a young girl that is magically taken to a past world with demons and monsters, including the titular character of Inuyasha—a dog demon. Using these images, the Fanime artists

¹²⁹ Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*, (University of California Press, 2015), 11.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 211-213.

¹³¹ The rabbit on the moon comes from stories in Japanese folklore, as well as the appearance of the shadows on the moon looking like a rabbit pounding mochi (a Japanese rice cake made from glutinous rice).

¹³² Foster, *The Book of Yokai*.

connected to both anime and Japanese cultural elements through the artwork used on their program guides, merchandise, and logos, which serves as a reminder of those connections to the convention's physical space, though it remained essentially unchanged from the previous convention.¹³³

While Fanime 2016 and 2017 changed minimally, Fanime 2018 changed drastically through leadership and organizing entity change. The company Anime Resource Group (ARG), formed from members of the clubs that came together for Fanime in 1994, had been the leading organization since the 1996 convention. Coming from fans themselves, this organization centered around the fans making an event that catered to anime and fans of Japanese culture, which ran as a company organization with a paid board of directors. In 2018, the new group known as the Foundation for Anime and Niche Subcultures (FANS from here on), a non-profit organization, formed to take over as the overseeing body for the con. Like ARG, the organization comprises of fans, many of whom have worked on staff for Fanime prior. While this movement moves from one fan-run entity to another, it also marked significant changes. It also was the first time for several years that Clockwork Alchemy was not a partnered affiliate, the event instead moving to a March date and alternate location. With the theme of games, Fanime 2018 boasted a sizable population of 34,000 paid attendees.¹³⁴ While most of the con infrastructure at the convention center remained the same as the previous year, some events moved into the DoubleTree, such as the tabletop gaming events for players above age eighteen, with the shuttle service to those events intact.

¹³³ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2015*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2015).

¹³⁴ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2018 Attendance*, <https://animecons.com/events/info/9036/fanimecon-2018>.

The twenty-fifth celebration of Fanime, called the Silver Celebration, was held in 2019 and included a very apt theme of the “Roaring ‘20s.” As part of its twenty-fifth anniversary, Fanime organized specialized events, including the “25th Anniversary Short Film Showcase,” where attendees could make videos or share pictures of their experiences at Fanime and the creation of Silver Island.¹³⁵ Silver Island took place in the area of the DoubleTree Hotel, where they moved some of their 18+ events, including the Hentai Rooms (adult erotic anime video streams), Adult Gaming Rooms, and an added casino event.¹³⁶ The attendance for the event topped 34,000 people, with door prices at \$85 at the door.¹³⁷ Thus 2019 marked the last convention in its usual format before the disruption of 2020, where the model formatted after twenty-five years of the convention shifted. As the pandemic worsened in mid-March, the CDC guidelines for Santa Clara County updated with the information where large events were not allowed.¹³⁸ To adhere to those guidelines, Fanime staff decided to defer the event (on April 13) so that the next event would be the following year. However, attendees wanting to have some sort of version of the convention stepped in, building off of the pre-established model and creating a stand-in virtually. Without that opening and pre-existing model, the version of the convention that fans ultimately produced would not exist.

From the beginning of Fanime, there was a strong tie from the fans into the production of the convention. Over time, this early coming together of clubs expanded, in attendance size, location, and reach. For instance, the inclusion of big-name industry leaders, such as Bandai or GAINAX, in turn, led to other companies’ interest and exhibitions within the convention space,

¹³⁵ *FanimeCon Program Guide 2019*, (San Jose: FanimeCon Publications, 2019).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *AnimeCons. AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2019 Attendance.*

¹³⁸ *CDC, Santa Clara County.*

fostering industry partnerships and repeat attendance, as seen with guests like Hiroyuki Yamaga. Furthermore, certain partners like Crunchyroll have additional positive attributes, such as assistance with video programming through new online services. In turn, those expansions create additional programming and events, catering to a growing attendance and fandoms. Within the organization of the staff, the volunteers work underneath guidelines set down by the larger organization party. Outside of that organization, attendees act as individual producers during the convention. In the case of Fanime 2020, those attendees acted outside of this organization to produce their version of the convention to share with others. In the following section, I outline the staff organization and structure, including departments and roles, better to situate the attendee experience outside of that structure.

2.3. Staff Organization of Fanime

As discussed previously, from 1996 to 2018, ARG was the parent organization for Fanime that oversaw the annual event. Their responsibilities included finding and hiring staff volunteers, maintaining event equipment, and organizing the event space, attendees, and guests, keeping financial records, and allocating funds from one con to the next to keep the event going. ARG was created from the founding organizations and included a board of directors. Under ARG's leadership, the convention changed distinctly as it grew out of the hotel scene and into the large convention space and came to encompass multiple hotels in the immediate surrounding area. As I will discuss to support my argument about fans acting as producers, I explain the official organization where staff is categorized into departments and delegated tasks from the top-down; tasks ranged from events to crowd control. While that structure of departments and top-down delegation remained during Fanime history, the names and departments shifted to fit

the needs of the ever-changing convention. This section creates a clear picture of how the staff organization functions and where attendees are ultimately outside of this structure.

Since 2018, FANS, a non-profit organization, has overseen the many volunteer staff members for Fanime. Only the top six staff positions are paid—the CEO, CFO, Secretary, and Directors—and form the core FANS organizers and board of directors. All other staff are unpaid volunteers and separated into departments that come together to put on the convention. The hierarchy of the staff runs as many different large departments underneath the FANS organization, which include department heads and dedicated staff. Underneath those large departments are smaller, specialized areas that correlate to either specific events or specific areas of the con, also with department heads and staff underneath them. My analysis that follows comes from the most recent 2019 program guide and my experience as staff. Thus I have decided to list the departments as the official program guide dictates. Under the FANS board of directors, there is the Repository, Facilities, Tech, IT, Office Management, and Logistics departments. These departments help with the administrative operations of FANS and set up and break down the convention and provide labor for the moving parts of the convention. Outside of FANS, the top of the hierarchy for the convention is the chair members. This team includes at least one main chair and several vice-chairs, who act as overseers above the other departments and are the “main faces” for the con. These positions are staffed with different people each year. Their primary focus is to keep the convention running smoothly and to work with other departments to create the event.

First, I would like to discuss Fan Services, which helps to facilitate central hub events during the convention. These departments include Artist Alley, the Art Gallery, the Dealer's Room, Fan Storage, the Swap Meet, and Registration. Grouped as Fan Services, some departments correlate directly to the events mentioned above and work to create, set up, and run

these events for the convention. Other duties include being in charge of sign-ups and registration and formatting the logistics behind each event in tandem with other teams for setting up and proper execution.

The following department is Communications, which works on direct communication with Creative Services, Artist Pool, Design Team, Publications, Content, Environmental Branding, Signage, Website, and Broadcasting. These organizing groups deal with anything that involves direct communication with attendees, including the art of the convention, the website, and program guides. These positions involve much pre-convention creation and initial setup. During the convention, some departments under Communications have work, such as tending to website updates and making sure signs and art displays correctly. As one of the largest anime cons in Northern California, it takes a lot to advertise for and spread awareness. Communications help to reach out to fans to attend and keep the convention-goers constantly informed and engaged while also acting as a promotion for the convention towards fans.

Another department is Programming, which is for events that do not fall under Fan Services or Extravaganzas, explained below. These departments are in charge of their respective events, from creating the convention's live events. These events include the Dance, Game Show, Arcade, E-Gaming, Tabletop Gaming, the Gaming Stage, Info Desks, Karaoke, Manga Lounge, Panels, Programming Operations, Speed Dating, Video Programming, and Fanime Music Videos. Staff under these categories work to put on each of these events, including being available for hours while at the convention to keep the events running smoothly. They also work with Logistics to set up their events at the convention, including complicated setups to work correctly. These events include many of the staples at the convention, from anime viewings to the gaming area and beyond, where the convention can see a lot of traffic and hype.

Guests are a huge part of Fanime, as many prominent named guests attend the convention every year. These include guests from Japan and the United States, from different areas such as the anime industry, video game industry, musical guests, and many more. Guest Relations is the department that handles inviting guests, arrangements, translators (as needed), and events during the convention. Underneath this department, there are Autographs, Hospitality, MusicFest, and Japanese Language Services. These staff members help maintain the relationship with guests and the convention and run events for fans to see and interact with those guests.

Apart from Fan Services and Programming, there is a third section of events under Extravaganzas' department. These include the Black and White Ball, Masquerade, Maid Café, Chibitainment, the Thrift Shop, Cosplay Gatherings, and Stage Zero. These large events specialize in taking many hands to create and work together with these departments and others to put on. Events like the Black and White Ball and the Cosplay gatherings are multiple, offering lessons and the many different gatherings, and often cover events for the duration of the convention. As such, a large team sees these areas for the entire length of the con. The final department under events is a new creation as of 2019 called Silver Island. This new event is an 18+ that only takes place outside of the convention center with provided shuttles. Adult events from previous years are now under the Silver Island umbrella, along with the Night Market, an Artist Alley geared towards adult audiences, both of which are the departments in charge specifically for these events. However, they do include panels, video programming, and an adult Artist Alley.

Moving into the more logistical and administration areas, the Operations department covers ConOps, Infrastructure, Lost and Found, Volunteers, Policy Relations, and Attendee Relations. During the convention, these departments remain open the entire convention to assist with the convention running, while Attendee Relations handles the event floor, including line

management and badge checks. ConOps, or Con Operations, acts as the main communication for the convention where staff can communicate through them to other departments. If a need arises, this area of the convention can act and delegate where needed. Relations staff are responsible for maintaining rules during the convention, as well as tending to attendees. They act as a bridge between staff and attendees. However, Staffing is a separate department that caters directly to staff members, from Staff Events and Appreciation to Staff Information.

Lastly, the Finance department, which includes Accounts Receivable, Accounts Payable, and Budgets handles all of the finances for the convention. As an NPO, the finances from the convention are rolled over to the next convention, as profits roll into the following years' expenses. Careful budgeting is required to keep the convention on track. Looking from the tax years 2018 and 2019, through public record listed on the FANS website, the convention costs add up to an average of around 1.6 million dollars and overall intake around 2.3 million dollars.¹³⁹ This leaves anywhere from \$600,000 to \$400,000 in revenue used to pay the part-time salaries of those in paid positions, while the rest is recycled over to pay other fees and towards the next year of the convention.

This type of organization suits the convention for delegating tasks and seeing that certain convention areas are overseen by large teams. Over 1,000 volunteer staff come together each year to make the physical event of Fanime annually. From the highlighted departments above, the team comes together through meetings to see the convention go on successfully. The overall success depends on these hardworking individuals, often working throughout the year. However, the deferment of 2020 allowed fans to move from attendees into some of these staff roles unofficially to create the virtual convention. For instance, rather than having a Panels staff

¹³⁹ "8-31-2019 FANS Public Disclosure," (FANS Tax Documents, San Jose, CA, 2019), 1.

overseeing and organizing all of the panels, individual virtual panel organizers took over the creation of their events and facilitated the event through online platforms, such as Twitch, working with other panel and event organizers to determine times. Likewise, other areas of the virtual convention went on without any staff organization. Virtual organizers maneuvered more so as individuals rather than under a larger umbrella of staff hierarchy. They lacked the staff support system, though they created their network of organizers through Facebook groups, Twitter correspondence, and the Fanime forums. The difference of this type of organization is essential as it outlines where the staff organization exists and how the fan producers of the virtual convention are outside of that structure. However, to better support the argument about attendees moving into the producer role, the following section analyzes Fanime in 2020, including background participant-observation and interview data.

3.1 Introduction to Interview Data

The stark contrast between Fanime before the year 2020 and the fan-made virtual convention resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section looks at the particulars of the 2020 convention and the surrounding context of how the pandemic caused the disruption which led to attendee fans taking over as producers of the virtual Fanime. This information includes the series of announcements, responses, and interview data collected for the sake of exploring the experiences of attendees, staff, and virtual organizers. This data supports my argument that Fanime’s reaction to the pandemic allowed fans to move from attendees into organizers, thus changing the convention's format. As the first and only type of Fanime convention of its kind, this version of the convention represents a new convention model in terms of being both wholly virtual and attendee-driven. Thus the primary source of this thesis is the people who took part in the 2020 FanimeCon and were affected by the changes made to its format due to the COVID-19 pandemic and those who organized the virtual convention.

To summarize the outside events leading to the deferment, I position the convention in terms of the pandemic of 2020. As previously summarized in the introduction, on March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 virus was officially recognized as a pandemic as it had entered the US with increased infection rates.¹⁴⁰ Following this announcement, on March 17, 2020, Santa Clara County updated its procedures to no longer allow events larger than 250 people to comply with new federal regulations and California’s “shelter-in-place” policy, where residents needed to stay

¹⁴⁰ Schuchat, “Public Health Response to the Initiation and Spread of Pandemic COVID.”

inside their homes unless absolutely necessary to go outside.¹⁴¹ With these policies in place, large events had to consider the overall safety of their attendees to be sure to adhere to new guidelines. Similarly, this affected other events in California as well, including CrunchyRoll Expo 2020 and Anime Expo 2020.¹⁴² For Fanime, this helped guide the staff to decide to defer as a result of those guidelines and with attendee safety in mind.

As a participant-observer, I was acutely aware of the announcements made to Fanime's official website and those on the Facebook and Twitter official handles. The first announcement happened on March 6 on the official Twitter and Fanime website simultaneously that stated: "At this time, we are planning to have FanimeCon in Downtown San Jose over Memorial Day weekend as scheduled. We will be working with all of our partners to ensure that our community is safe and will release a statement if the situation changes."¹⁴³ After this initial announcement, attendees asked for more updates, asking on the status of the convention as the convention start date of May 22 edged closer. As the original intent of this thesis was to conduct on-site research, I, too, had to go through the official channels of attendance and hotel acquisition. This initial pre-registration period opened from October 29, 2019, thru January 31, 2020, and the hotel reservation system was open until April 18 for those pre-registered. These observations are autoethnographic from my experience as the researcher, starting from January 2020 (before the end of the first pre-registration period) through the aftermath of the virtual convention from May 22 to 25. My observations, paired with the interview data, support a complete picture and explanation of the fans coming together to create the virtual con.

¹⁴¹ CDC, *Santa Clara County*; Covid-19.CA.Gov, "About COVID-19 restrictions," California.gov, (May 4, 2021), <https://covid19.ca.gov/stay-home-except-for-essential-needs/>

¹⁴² Virtual Crunchyroll Expo; Anime Expo 2020.

¹⁴³ Wu, *FanimeCon - COVID-19 Update from FanimeCon*.

To support my argument that the pandemic disruption led to the fans producing their virtual Fanime and provide the context of the events surrounding Fanime 2020, I interviewed eight individuals, six attendees, one staff, and one individual that was both staff and a virtual event organizer, regarding their experiences with Fanime; many of my research subjects had been regular attendees at the convention. These interviews were conducted wholly online through Zoom and Discord. I reached out to people who had planned to attend and had made hotel reservations but, due to the pandemic, had decided not to go before the event was officially deferred in April. I prepared a set of interview questions (see Appendix) to ask about my interviewees' past experiences with anime conventions and Fanime in particular and about their experiences in 2020. I did so to help assess the fast-changing situation of Fanime scheduling and gain a better sense of how the experiences influenced thoughts and feelings about the con, some of which led to the virtual con. My questions ranged from how my interviewees first chose to attend Fanime to what they thought about the announcements and changes during the 2020 pandemic. From these interactions, I chart factors that led to creating the virtual event by fans, including ideas of interactivity, commitment, and production, while also looking at the fans' experience with Fanime and other conventions during this time.

3.2 Setting the Stage: Changes in Fanime 2020

In January 2020, I began researching this thesis and made arrangements to attend Fanime 2020. I secured my pre-registration and hotel accommodation by January 31. As the pandemic worsened in February and March, and other conventions were being canceled or postponed, like Emerald City Comic Con on March 6, which announced: "We did everything that we could to run the event as planned. However, ultimately, we are following the guidance of the local public

health officials, indicating that conventions should now be postponed.”¹⁴⁴ This announcement came within the week the convention was going to be held on March 13, when the event was postponed to 2021. Due to my plans to attend Fanime 2020, I took this as a sign to keep an eye on the FanimeCon website and the official convention Twitter and Facebook sites for announcements.¹⁴⁵ I saw that from February, attendees used social media forums to ask questions about the status of the convention and whether or not it would take place. Fanime responded with the announcement on March 6, as quoted above, where the con organization was still assessing the situation and would provide specific answers when they knew what was best to do for the convention following pandemic guidelines.

As an update on March 22, 2020, Fanime chairperson Eric Wu released the following public announcement on the Fanime website:

We are working with our partners to monitor the potential impact that COVID-19 may have on FanimeCon 2020. In the inevitable aftermath of this unusual period of social isolation, we hope to host the convention as a place for our community to heal and come together once again. We are taking the optimistic view that the situation will improve by Memorial Day to offer a safe and fun event to continue serving the FanimeCon fans.¹⁴⁶

The statement caused an uproar of responses across all Fanime social media and ranged from praise to heavy criticism, though the staff made it clear they were keeping an eye on the CDC guidelines for Santa Clara County.¹⁴⁷ Some users felt relief from the announcement and stated they were happy to be still able to go. In contrast, others questioned the safety measures that

¹⁴⁴ Reedpop, *Emerald City Comic Con*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Wu, *FanimeCon - COVID-19 Update from FanimeCon*.

¹⁴⁷ Covid-19.CA.Gov, “About COVID-19 restrictions.”

would be taken and cited the current guidelines (at the time) for Santa Clara County that were not in favor of any large events.¹⁴⁸

Concerned, one attendee started the “Postpone FanimeCon 2020” petition on Change.org, a website designed to house online petitions and get online signatures, in response to the announcement in March 2020.¹⁴⁹ It was paired with an accompanying Twitter account to gain support.¹⁵⁰ While the Twitter account answered questions posted to the official Fanime Twitter account, the petition gathered 427 signatures.¹⁵¹ After the March 22 announcement, many attendees went to Twitter, asking questions like, “Is it going to be canceled or postponed?” on Twitter.¹⁵² Official replies explained that they were monitoring the situation carefully and would decide once they had sufficient information to do so.

On April 13, 2020, the following correspondence came with the announcement “FanimeCon 2020 Deferred to 2021.”¹⁵³ In the deferral announcement, Wu stated:

We are reaching out to you today to announce that FanimeCon will be deferred to May 28-31, 2021. We thank you for your patience while we worked to establish a healthy and safe solution for the convention during a pandemic. Until recently, we

¹⁴⁸ Rei (@reizu_rei), Twitter post, March 23, 2020, https://twitter.com/reizu_rei/status/1242289613391052802.

¹⁴⁹ FanimeCon Supporters, *Postpone FanimeCon 2020*, Change.org, PBC, March 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/fanimecon-fans-postpone-fanimecon-2020>.

¹⁵⁰ FanimeCon Fans & Supporters - Postpone FanimeCon (@FanimeC), Twitter account, created March 2020, <https://twitter.com/FanimeC>.

¹⁵¹ FanimeCon Supporters, *Postpone FanimeCon 2020*.

¹⁵² Zero Two (@NullZweii), Twitter post, March 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/NullZweii/status/1242214626411999232>.

¹⁵³ Wu, *FanimeCon - FanimeCon 2020 Deferred to 2021*.

did not have a viable solution, but with the hard work of our partner management team, we were able to come to this resolution.¹⁵⁴

Further, the announcement stated that attendee tickets would be rolled over to 2021 to “help us remain financially stable and cover expenses we have already incurred this year.”¹⁵⁵ While this announcement came close to the event start date in May, other conventions made similar decisions. Sakura-con, a prominent anime convention in Seattle set to take place April 10 thru 12, 2020, announced on March 16, 2020: “The Executive Board would like to announce that in light of the current situation with COVID-19 and in line with Seattle Mayor Durkan’s decree on March 13 2020, we have no other option than to cancel Sakura-Con 2020. Active 2020 memberships will be automatically transferred to 2021.”¹⁵⁶

As this decision was in line with other conventions, it followed a precedent. However, the Fanime announcement understandably sent off a barrage of rapid responses on all forms of social media. Twitter users responded most quickly to the announcement about deferment and badge fee rollovers rather than refunds than the previous announcements. This feeling was evident in posts on April 13, 2020. Some users were upset that the convention had been deferred but was happy for the safe call.¹⁵⁷ Others wrote posts like, “This was expected, and I’m disappoint[ed] it took so long to announce. Though, why aren’t refunds available?”¹⁵⁸ On Fanime forums, users debated the legality of the refund situation (in a since-removed forum post referenced in a new

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Brandy Smith, *Sakura-Con 2020 Cancelled*, Sakura-Con, March 16, 2020, <http://sakuracon.org/2020/03/sakura-con-2020-cancelled/>.

¹⁵⁷ FanimeCon (@FanimeCon), Twitter post, April 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FanimeCon/status/1249852940841558018>.

¹⁵⁸ Lupe (@chocmarsh), Twitter post, April 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/chocmarsh/status/1249902778975019010>.

forum thread).¹⁵⁹ However, the convention announcement explicitly mentioned that the rollover of badges was due to financial stability, which would help with costs towards the next year of the convention.

Meanwhile, news sites began to share the announcement of the deferment as it had never happened before and was a first-time occurrence. This news even made it onto the small-based Japanese site ani-ensei.net (described prior), where a poster translated the deferment announcement into Japanese. Not only did the writer translate the announcement, but they gave more general information such as that “Yuriko Yamaguchi was an announced guest” and reiterated the point that “[Fanime] was canceled without refunding 2020 to maintain the operation of 2021.”¹⁶⁰ While Fanime often uses elements or images of Japanese culture outside of anime, manga, and video games during the convention and inviting Japanese industrial or music guests, it is not often cited on Japanese sources, thus showcasing the reach of the announcement. Fanime followed other convention’s precedent for their eventual deferment, including the decision regarding refunds, but there were other factors behind the ultimate decision. From contract negotiations and hotel arrangements (which were canceled as part of the deferment) and watching the changing CDC guidelines, the staff made the informed decision of the deferment without refund.

Amidst the frenzy of responses posted on various social media platforms, Fanime official Twitter reposted the Fanime board and FANS’ official responses while directing other inquiries to official email channels. However, after April, announcements from the official Twitter handle stopped while activity remained on handles, like Fanime Panels and Fanime Gaming Twitter

¹⁵⁹ FanimeCon Forums, *Fanime 2021. Still no info? No refund info? No deferments? Anything?*, FanimeCon.com, February 11th, 2021. <https://forums.fanime.com/index.php/topic,21942.0.html>.

¹⁶⁰ ani-ensei.net. “FanimeCon 2020 が、新型コロナウイルスの影響で 2021 年 5 月に延期（実質中止）。”

accounts and other attendee-led forums.¹⁶¹ Along with other attendee groups, in both Facebook groups and on the Fanime forums, some users discussed holding virtual convention events, such as some of the panels or suggestions of having the artists from Artist Alley come together to have a showcase.¹⁶² This suggestion came out of the idea to have a “pretend” Fanime, a word used to explain the phenomenon by one of my respondents, that came out of a Facebook group advocating for an online Fanime, which formed into a multiple-event online convention as more people came aboard, including attendees and some staff members acting on their own accord.¹⁶³ Virtual events for the weekend of May 23 to 25, the convention’s dates, were initially posted in the forum posts and on private Twitter accounts. In the week preceding the event, around May 16, the Fanime Panels Twitter handle, usually in charge of panel organization, retweeted the information as a form of advertising for the virtual events.¹⁶⁴ However, the organization of the online Fanime event remained in the hands of the fan organizers without direct assistance Fanime staff, although they did post a direct advertisement that came later.

On May 23, 2020—the Friday of Memorial Day weekend and the usual first day of the four-day convention—the Fanime website updated its page to include a list of dealers that had intended to be part of the physical convention, along with the schedule of events for the virtual Fanime beginning on May 23.¹⁶⁵ Fanime’s official channels acted overall as an advertisement to

¹⁶¹ FanimeCon Panels (@FanimePanels), Twitter account, Posts from March 22 – May 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FanimePanels>.

¹⁶² FanimeCon Forums, *Just a thought with the cancellation*, FanimeCon.com, April 2020, <https://forums.fanime.com/index.php/topic,21896.0.html>.

¹⁶³ Anonymous Respondent #4, interviewed by author, February 26, 2021.

¹⁶⁴ FanimeCon Panels (@FanimePanels), Twitter post, May 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FanimePanels/status/1262846287616995329>.

¹⁶⁵ FanimeCon, *FanimeCon 2020 Virtual Events*.

boost the fan-run events from their Twitter pages and Facebook pages.¹⁶⁶ Some Fanime staple events, like the Black and White Ball, joined to host virtual versions of events, which were live-streamed on Discord, such as the “Decompression Dance,” which hosted soothing music on the official Discord on May 23, 2020, or the “Black and White Discord Ball” on May 24, 2020.¹⁶⁷ Another event, the J-fashion show hosted by Ursa Major in 2020, which is an event infrequently held in Fanime’s history that showcases artist fashion lines made by designers with accompanying panels such as “Where to Buy Lolita Fashion and Accessories,” was advertised via their Facebook page, but with showings held on Twitch from May 22 to May 24.¹⁶⁸ Otherwise, the small number of other panels available on hosts’ Twitch accounts, such as “Con Stories” hosted on Twitch on Friday, May 23 or “Anime Goes to Hollywood” on May 24.¹⁶⁹ From the attendee side, most of the event's creators streamed live. If chat boxes were available, others could comment and communicate but remained relatively one-way in terms of interactivity, meaning that commenters could speak with each other if the chat were moving slow enough. Otherwise, the interaction was in mutual viewings, such as with video events like “Midnight Madness,” an adult anime video (often parody) viewing event held on Saturday, May 24 at 11 pm.¹⁷⁰

While I could not attend every event of the virtual Fanime convention, I attended parts of the video fashion shows as hosted by the Ursa Major J-Fashion show. These videos were

¹⁶⁶ FanimeCon Panels (@FanimePanels) account.

¹⁶⁷ FanimeCon Black & White Ball (@FanimeConBWBall), Twitter post, May 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FanimeConBWBall/status/1263907484953128960>.

¹⁶⁸ The Black Ribbon, "Ursa Major. A virtual J-fashion Event," Facebook.com, May 15, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/945606625895702/permalink/951185772004454/>.

¹⁶⁹ FanimeCon, *FanimeCon 2020 Virtual Events*.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

broadcast through Facebook, either through Twitch or on YouTube, like one recorded section of a video still on their Facebook page.¹⁷¹ These videos showcased designer lines as posed by models or creators to celebrate and promote their line. On these video events, the interaction was minimal and meant primarily for viewing. In contrast, on the Fashion panels held on Twitch, the information was live-streamed, and participants could talk together or ask questions via the Twitch chat to the panelists via the chat box. The amount of participant interaction depended on several factors, the most important of which was the event platform. Twitch by far was the most popular platform thanks to its live-streaming capabilities and well-known name as a service generally used by gaming live-streamers. Those with Twitch accounts can comment to others with accounts in a chat box to the side of the live stream. In addition, Twitch allows for hundreds, even thousands of viewers at a time. Fewer events, such as the Black and White Ball events, were hosted on Discord, a well-known platform among gaming communities. Discord acts primarily as a chat feature but allows for live streaming via voice or sharing chats, though it has limited capabilities and a cap of fifty people per streaming chat. Rather than watching a single live stream, users must be “on-call” in a voice-chat-capable room where the hosting member live streams their screen or presentation. Both platforms allow for comments during live streaming but act differently as an event in a physical space. There is a clear space for talking among the event in the chat areas where hosts can choose to engage, and others may carry a conversation. This format is unlike the physical convention and events held in panel rooms, where speaking would disrupt a panel until at a time when attendees can ask questions. On the other hand, certain events expect audience interaction, such as “Midnight Madness” programming, which falls under anime parody videos where viewers should laugh or talk around the videos.

¹⁷¹ The Black Ribbon, "Ursa Major. A virtual J-fashion Event."

Based on my research, the virtual convention was thought to be successful overall because it attracted attendees of a couple hundred (in total, per one of my informants).¹⁷² However, it did not reach numbers anywhere near the total attendance of Fanime, which in 2019 was over 34,000 people.¹⁷³ As a fan-run event, the organizers advertised on their personal accounts, such as Twitter handles or Facebook pages, before their events and run their events outside of Fanime. While some events had previously been at Fanime or run by staff, such as the Black and White Ball, these staffers acted independently to bring these events into online spaces. Rather than a staff-run Fanime 2020 online, it was a fan-run event rather than a creation of the official organization instead of other conventions that created their online events, like CrunchyRoll Expo 2020.¹⁷⁴ My observations centered around the experience as an attendee, but from the limited announcements and delayed schedule announcements, the fan-run virtual event acted as Fanime events, though organizers formed them without staff organization assistance.

Due to the disruption of the pandemic, as a result of Fanime staff carefully following health guidelines, the deferment of the convention left an opening without a planned virtual event, as the above data supports. However, through internet platforms and groups, such as Facebook groups, a small group of attendees came together to create online events that translated into the virtual Fanime 2020. The use of these platforms is an example of Tsutsui's commentary that fans often make "extensive use of the Internet, creating blogs, chat rooms, and websites, to interact, build communities and share information."¹⁷⁵ As these examples of fan production, the

¹⁷² Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

¹⁷³ AnimeCons, *AnimeCons.com - Fanime 2019 Attendance*.

¹⁷⁴ Joseph Luster, "All the Crunchyroll Announcements at Virtual Crunchyroll Expo 2020," Crunchyroll.com, September 9, 2020, <https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-news/2020/09/09-1/all-the-crunchyroll-announcements-at-virtual-crunchyroll-expo-2020>.

¹⁷⁵ Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, 46.

virtual convention resulted from using the internet to build a community event. Similarly, Sandra Annett explains, “changes in material media technologies... have a strong impact on the kinds of individual viewing positions and collective communities that can form around animation,” which points to technological use as a way to create communities, which I employ here as another viewpoint on the production of the virtual con, which was meant to stand-in for the community feeling of the virtual convention.¹⁷⁶ In this case, the absence of an official production or channel, like with the argument of early fansubbers who were “driven by fan demands,” where these “demands” were more of a yearning to have any sort convention rather than the absence of one.¹⁷⁷

However, these interpretations are limited in scope from my participant-observation. To better support my argument, I engaged with digital interviews with respondents who experienced the turbulent disruptions of Fanime 2020, including one that helped create the virtual con. Attendees shared vital information regarding their motivations and thoughts behind the convention, furthering the idea of connection to the con and likely reasons that pushed for the production of the virtual convention. These interviews are limited in number but provide a contextual basis and proof of the ideas I’ve presented behind the creation of the virtual convention. These ideas include the drive for community and interactivity, as well as a gap left open by the organizing entity of Fanime that allowed for fans to maneuver into those roles.

¹⁷⁶ Sandra Annett, *Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.

¹⁷⁷ McLelland, *The End of Cool Japan*.

3.3 Connections from Interviews to Conventions

Interview information from the following section better situates my argument of fans as producers by speaking directly to fans affected by the deferment of Fanime 2020, who had experience with the convention and also helped to create the virtual version of the con. With these interviews, I asked questions based on Fanime, including respondent experience with the convention and information about Fanime specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews provide observations of the relationship between respondents and the convention, and chart how the changes through the pandemic led to the virtual event. As this thesis primarily looks at the movement of attendee fans into the role of organizer and producer of the convention, these interviews provide the first-hand experience through qualitative data. Additionally, the interviews investigate the progression of events from the perspective of these respondents and their personal experiences surrounding changes to Fanime for 2020.

Of all of the study participants, seven out of the eight were between the ages of thirty and forty-two, with a single participant between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four. Seven of the respondents live in and around California, with one within another state. Five stated that they chose to go to Fanime because it was close to their homes. Every participant had attended Fanime more than once and were repeat attendees. Three had moved from attendee to staff, although only two were going to be on staff this year and spoke openly about the decision to change to staff. Everyone had positive things to say with their experiences about Fanime, often citing their friends and the interactivity elements of being around each other. Before 2020, this was in the physical space of the convention itself. Thus it was brought up over again when asked about past experiences with conventions.

From these answers, the attendees expressed a deep connection to Fanime, with all respondents connected in fandom, using Lamerichs words, “as individuals who are connected by

their love for a particular text.”¹⁷⁸ In this case, the love of anime bringing the respondents to this particular convention. For four attendees, this adoration translated to attending for over a decade and made it a yearly tradition.¹⁷⁹ This repeat attendance, along with the fact that many volunteer staff members were former attendees, shows a level of connection to the convention that drives continued support and attendance to the physical space of the convention. When asked, “how did you come to Fanime specifically,” six respondents answered that they first attended thanks to their friends. For example, one respondent answered, “it was my first con, and my best friends at the time in high school were going.”¹⁸⁰ Other respondents echoed the sentiment that attending a con was a shared communal experience with friends; this compelled them to continue going, often with the same group of people. Those same six respondents said that they enjoyed attending Fanime before 2020 largely because of the communal experience.¹⁸¹ One respondent, I will call her Informant #2, placed substantial value on the sense of community and explained that she had attended different years with different groups of friends, but it was always the “friends element” that made her want to come back.¹⁸² This sentiment is reminiscent of what one of Susan Napier respondents writes, where she states that “fan subcultures provide a space for the community. They allow people of a diverse background to form bonds around a common interest,” which explains part of the reason respondents are not only attached to members of their community but the space of that community (like a convention) as well.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Lamerichs, *Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence*.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

¹⁸⁰ Anonymous Respondent #1, interviewed by author, January 6, 2021.

¹⁸¹ Anonymous Respondent #2, interviewed by author, January 14, 2021.

¹⁸² Anonymous Respondent #2, interview.

¹⁸³ Napier, "The World of Anime Fandom in America," 47.

These answers exemplify what Eng discusses as a draw from his study on anime conventions, where “just casually interacting and talking about their shared interest in the medium” is the main draw for attendees.¹⁸⁴ This interactive network expands into these large fan events as is suggestive not only of connections but his description where attendees “agreed that they enjoyed them as places to socialize with other anime fans.”¹⁸⁵ However, there are two caveats when making these connections from fandom into socialized communities. The first is the point that Eng makes that “anime fan communities are highly social and networked, relying on a combination of online and offline connections,” where some fans prefer one to the other, or a mixture of both online and offline spaces.¹⁸⁶ Echoed by Napier in her look at an online Miyazaki mailing list, she states that in particular fan space that members “shy away from conventions and more typical fan activities, citing their dislike for the commercialism and frivolity of these engagements.”¹⁸⁷ Therefore, while anime cons act as space for these fans to come together, online elements are inherently embedded within those fandoms, which includes spaces to engage in online communities like in forums, social media, or websites. Until 2020, there were limited online elements of conventions. However, attendees often come to conventions to make a real-life connection with people met online, utilizing the space for their meetings. The second caveat mentioned above is a concept that Eriko Yamato pulls from Matt Hills, which states that fandom does not exist “simply as a community but also as a *social hierarchy* (my emphasis) where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of

¹⁸⁴ Eng, "Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture," 175.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 175.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid,158.

¹⁸⁷ Napier, "The World of Anime Fandom in America," 52.

fandom, and status.”¹⁸⁸ In terms of an anime convention, this relates to staff hierarchy over attendees as they act as an organizing party. Not only that, but within the fandom, at the convention, there are these social hierarchies, which include concepts of fan producers, like through ideas of expertise, or with cosplay. By acknowledging online fan spaces and social hierarchy, the image of a convention connects these concepts, where Fanime transcends both of those elements through means of its fan-run virtual convention.

Expanding on the previous question specific to Fanime, interviewees gave other reasons for repeat attendance to the convention, speaking to their particular favorites.¹⁸⁹ These reasons ranged depending on the respondent, where Informant #3 preferred cosplay and the cosplay Masquerade event. Informant #1 enjoyed shopping at the Dealer's Hall and Artist Alleys, and Informant #4, a previous attendee and staff member, enjoyed going to and hosting panel events. However, just as there are favorite events, my respondents expressed concern for or advocated for changes. For example, one respondent, who asked to be identified as Mr. Amanojaku, said that he would want to change the “speed dating” event or get rid of it entirely because the event was unbalanced in terms of gender and was scheduled at inconvenient times.¹⁹⁰ Informant #4 said he would improve the WiFi connection, and as someone with experience as both attendee and staff, claimed this as an infrastructural issue because limited WiFi affected how events were held and coordinated.¹⁹¹ This question was designed to look at elements of the physical event, both positively and negatively, to later contrast with the virtual convention in terms of the

¹⁸⁸ Yamato, “Construction of discursive fandom.” Italics are my emphasis.

¹⁸⁹ Eriko Yamato explains in their work that “most have particular things they like to do as attendees,” and similarly, my respondents gravitated towards specific elements or events of the convention.

¹⁹⁰ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

¹⁹¹ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

available events. As explained thoroughly above, some events that are staples, like the Dealer Hall or Artist Alley, were available as a set of links to specific companies or artists set up by fans (linked to the Fanime website on May 23 as part of the online convention announcement) for people to share support.¹⁹²

To better understand Fanime's role in the history of American anime cons, and to look at what Andrew McKeivitt says when he suggests that conventions were part of "conscious efforts to define anime as a distinct cultural category, to develop knowledge about the medium and its relationship to Japanese culture."¹⁹³ I asked interviewees asked about how Fanime has shaped their understanding of Japanese culture. Six respondents stated that they had not significantly learned anything new about Japanese culture through anime conventions but had an interest before attending the convention. Only two respondents stated they had learned more about Japanese culture through means available at the con. Informant #1 remarked that she "learned a lot by going to conventions that I didn't and wouldn't have known before. There were always panels for Japanese-related things: culture, cuisine, and of course anime."¹⁹⁴ Informant #2 similarly commented that Fanime had provided anime viewing suggestions, thus giving a more significant expansion for Japanese media, but did not indicate that this had been a significant factor or accurate representation of Japanese culture.¹⁹⁵ Other respondents mentioned that the Fanime staff had added additional forms of Japanese culture to the program over the years, such

¹⁹² FanimeCon, *Dealer's Hall Listing*, Fanime.com, Accessed 2020, <https://www.fanime.com/maps/dealers-hall-map/>.

¹⁹³ McKeivitt, "'You Are Not Alone!,'" 906.

¹⁹⁴ Anonymous Respondent #1, interview.

¹⁹⁵ Anonymous Respondent #2, interview.

as the *taiko* drumming and martial arts exhibitions in the Dojo, though emphasized keeping anime as the primary media-object.

While the main focus of this thesis remains on the pivots of Fanime during COVID-19 that resulted in fans moving into the role of producers of the con, the myriad of reasons behind the creation of Fanime as an anime convention remains a vital factor. As “anime conventions trace their history to science fiction and comic book conventions,” they are also like anime clubs and fansubber groups, where this type of fan production within conventions started as “members of the fledgling anime fan community would get together informally in their hotel rooms to show off the latest anime they had acquired” to create their own spaces.¹⁹⁶ Fanime represents a West Coast model of an anime convention, but it carries the elements of other anime conventions as it centralizes around Japanese culture and popular media as a space in which to share. As explained earlier through the long history of Fanime, the convention utilizes imagery, language, and cultural elements in tandem with its programming, including video, industry, and fan-run events to continually bring those elements. Likewise, the change of the name of the Fanime organizing company from the Anime Resource Group to the Foundation for Anime and Niche Subcultures exemplifies this expansion of cultural and media elements to encompass anime and other niche subcultures surrounding Japanese popular culture, as well as other fandoms. This expansion into other areas increases attendance and acts as a continual draw for this specific convention. In context to COVID-19, these are only some driving factors to the attendees’ continued support, as well as one of the driving forces for attendees to step in and produce the virtual convention. To understand other driving forces, the following section looks specifically at attendee experiences and motivations.

¹⁹⁶ Eng, “Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture,” 174.

3.3.1 Attendee Interviews

Attendees form the basis for conventions as they act as the main force of engagement for the convention. The following interviews focus on attendee respondents to support the argument about fans moving from similar attendee experiences towards staff, though not through official channels. To begin, five of the six attendees I interviewed had already pre-registered for Fanime 2020 before the deferment, while the other had been waiting to pre-register at a later time. All but one were aware of the first announcement to stay open. I asked the five respondents who had registered if they were concerned about the staff intention to keep the convention on schedule. Their responses fell into two categories. The first were two respondents, Informant #2 and Informant #6, who felt little concern because they had anticipated that the staff would monitor the situation and would likely cancel.¹⁹⁷ The second came from the other three respondents that were more concerned; as a respondent, which I will identify as Informant #5, remarked, “I thought it was irresponsible of them to try to open during a dangerous outbreak. Safety of people should come before virtually anything else.”¹⁹⁸ Regardless of their level of concern, all attendee respondents were disappointed that Fanime 2020 would not be in person. The most recurring reasons included missing friends or missing their vacation.¹⁹⁹ However, most were relieved that the convention was postponed for the sake of the safety of its attendees.

The first point of the question goes back to the previous point about Napier’s work where “fellowship and solidarity” are created by the space of a con, though not unique to it.²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous Respondent #6, interviewed by author, April 9, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Anonymous Respondent #5, interviewed by author, April 6, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²⁰⁰ Napier, “The World of Anime Fandom in America.”

attendee responses supported this, primarily towards friends or interactivity as the main draw to the convention as it manifests in the physical space. In connection to the COVID-19 announcements, these responses show the strong connection between attendees and the convention and their adaptation to the deferral of the convention in light of the pandemic precautions. While social media posts vary between negative and positive interactions, most attendees fell into the first category of attendee responses, where the concern existed, but attendees understood the health concerns.

The following information supports my research on how Fanime, and by extension other anime cons, decided to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the gap for attendee producers to move in. Therefore, these questions mainly concern an outside perspective, though all answers are opinions and therefore must be understood as such. That said, eighty percent of respondents had a negative perception of the convention handling. Informant #6 told me that they “felt they could have handled it better, but I understand the stress it probably caused on the staff.”²⁰¹ Another respondent, who asked to be identified as Heavysauce555, echoed his sentiment by saying the response was “slightly rough” and that “there could have been more communication coming from Fanime’s side to the people who bought tickets.”²⁰² At least three respondents openly stated they wanted organizers to be more forthright with information on social media. Two respondents mentioned they would have preferred to know further in advance of the April 13, 2020 deferment, with more time before the convention would start.

The reactions of the attendee group to the announcement of the deferral carried over to the questions regarding the virtual, fan-made convention that took place in place of Fanime 2020.

²⁰¹ Anonymous Respondent #6, interview.

²⁰² Heavysauce555, interviewed by author, April 6, 2021.

Five respondents were completely unaware of the virtual convention, while one respondent mentioned having seen its announcement and looking over the events. Informant #2's opinion as to how it happened was as follows, where she stated, "I stopped checking the website after I saw it was deferred because I thought that was it."²⁰³ Likewise, others were not aware of announcements on the Fanime website, Twitter, or Facebook pages. This led several respondents to say that they wished there had been better communication between Fanime organizers and attendees. Informant #5 felt they could improve by using email more often.²⁰⁴ Informant #1, and others, suggested a more active use of social media and more frequent announcements.²⁰⁵ This suggestion was a point that all respondents shared, where they felt that communication between staff and attendees needed improvement, giving suggestions as featured above.

Finally, I asked the attendees if they thought that conventions held after the pandemic would include virtual or hybrid components. All of the attendee respondents believed that future cons would likely include virtual elements, but four of the attendees clarified that they did not want to give up the use of physical space entirely. Informant #6 explained, "I think [Fanime] will be a mixture of in-person when things are open again and virtual for people that want to attend but aren't necessarily open to being around all those people again."²⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Informant #5 suggested that Fanime may have to restrict or cap participants at virtual cons.²⁰⁷ The respondent Mr. Amanojaku also replied, "I could see things develop like if they put some time into like planning it, I can see that they develop it into something people like," relating that the staff

²⁰³ Anonymous Respondent #2, interview.

²⁰⁴ Anonymous Respondent #5, interview.

²⁰⁵ Anonymous Respondent #1, interview.

²⁰⁶ Anonymous Respondent #6, interview.

²⁰⁷ Anonymous Respondent #5, interview.

element might be a part of the development in the future.²⁰⁸ All attendee respondents were reluctant to go to an entirely virtual event for fears of missing out on interactivity. As one respondent observed, “There is a sense of community and comradery in person that you can’t get online.”²⁰⁹ Other respondents gave similar answers, wanting to maintain the relationships gained by being at the convention in the physical space.

As Eriko Yamato surmises, “an enormous amount of fan work and fan activity continues to take place offline,” which includes the physical spacing of a convention.²¹⁰ However, as Napier looks into, in online communities, “fans are able to produce a form of community that, in its emotional supportiveness, intellectual atmosphere,” like at an anime con.²¹¹ To better connect this interview data, two ideas come to mind. On the one, due to a long-running established model and structure of the physical convention, the production that goes into the creation and running of an anime convention is due to the work of the volunteer staff organization under that model. On the other hand, that production is not limited to offline spaces and can move outside of that structure into online spaces, thus allowing attendees into that space. While both con staff and attendees share in being fans, they occupy different levels of engagement to that convention. However, I argue that the deep connection between fans and the convention is part of what pushed attendees to act as producers to have a semblance of Famine in the absence of a staff-run event to keep the convention as a space for their community. While a focus on attendees helps to solidify the relationship of attendees to the convention is necessary to explain why attendees

²⁰⁸ Mr. Amanojaku, interview.

²⁰⁹ Anonymous Respondent #6, interview.

²¹⁰ Yamato, “Construction of discursive fandom,” 471.

²¹¹ Napier, “The World of Anime Fandom in America.”

pushed for the online event, this is a one-sided outlook. Thus the following section delves deeper into the organization and experience of staff, including the experience of being staff for Fanime, an experience with other virtual conventions, and one staff member that later acted as one of the virtual event organizers.

3.3.2 Staff Interviews

To support my argument about the change of production for the virtual Fanime 2020 moving outside of the staff organization, I conducted interviews with those who had initially planned to work as a staff. To gain a sense of this perspective, I interviewed two Fanime 2020 volunteer staff members: a member of Guest Relations and a member of Programming that acted as one of the main organizers of the virtual convention. Before becoming staff members, both had been Fanime attendees. I asked them why they wanted to be on the staff. The representative from Guest Relations, Informant #3, encapsulated why she wanted to join the staff and work long hours rather than attending events and panels and otherwise enjoying the con by explaining: “Staff are very dedicated, I have to say, having gone through it myself. You really have to want to contribute to the community and maybe not really do as much for yourself if you’re staffing.”²¹² The other respondent, Informant #4, who spent years working in Video Programming, agreed:

One thing that I thought was nice about being a staff member is that as a convention goer you might tend to stay with your group of friends that you're going with sure, people do meet other groups, but people often do tend to stay in

²¹² Anonymous Respondent #3, interviewed by author, January 15, 2021.

their groups and then I see that being a staff member is that the whole staff kind of had this kind of feeling of like we're in this together.²¹³

This connection is another facet of the interactivity prized by the attendee respondents. Informant #4 shared a similar experience as he continued to work on the Video Programming department for many years and formed bonds with other staff members and attendees at the events he oversaw and later produced in 2020.²¹⁴

Both staff respondents were content with their choice to do volunteer work at Fanime and spoke very positively about their experiences, although the pandemic affected both of their positions. I asked both if they had any concerns about the effects of COVID-19 on the convention from an organizational standpoint, looking to see what the situation was like on the staffing end – such as if they were aware of decisions coming down from the higher-ups. Informant #3 explained that in January and February of 2020 that “immediately there were concerned people. Like, what's going to happen at the convention? And we didn't have that much information initially, but the people who run the convention every year sent updates, like email updates, to everybody.”²¹⁵ However, she also stated, “I didn't feel too much anxiety over this because I knew that [the organizers] were on top of it.”²¹⁶ Similarly, informant #4 had been aware of the situation: “I was like, Fanime is not going to happen. It's just a question of what it's going to take for the staff, for leadership, to recognize that it was canceled.”²¹⁷ Whereas Informant #3 mentioned a volley of emails to staff during this time, Informant #4 said that there

²¹³ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

²¹⁴ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²¹⁵ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

was less communication than he was expecting and instead learned about staff decisions around the same time as the attendees did.

While Informant #3 could not continue their staff job due to the convention deferral, they attended other online conventions as an attendee during 2020. Informant #4, also without an official staff position due to the deferral, became part of the virtual Fanime convention, as I will later explain. Informant #3 explained that she was not aware of the virtual convention because she was not actively following Fanime announcements at the time.²¹⁸ As the virtual Fanime was organized primarily by attendee fans, although some organizers had worked on staff, she described it as a “grassroots” convention.²¹⁹ She explained her opinion that the grassroots nature of the virtual convention might have been a timing issue, as she had not seen online conventions happen yet; therefore, there was a period when there was not a sort of “blueprint” for online versions of conventions yet.²²⁰ Compared to her other experience with a canceled convention of 2020, Crunchyroll Expo 2020, she explained that the events appeared vastly different. Informant #3 explained her experience with the usual local physical event, now international online cosplay contest at Crunchyroll Expo as an example, explaining that:

The cultural experience is very different. I think the deadline for the application saying that you wanted to be a cosplayer in their show was a month before the event, and so that's already a significant huge time difference right there. Then you had to submit your proposal, which is a portfolio of what you were planning to do. It is serious, and then it was crazy like I had to sign a bunch of paperwork, and then we had to make a one-minute video. I was like, OK, so not only am I

²¹⁸ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

cosplaying, but now I have to record it, which is a separate skill, and then I have to figure out how to edit the video, which is another skill. For a lot of cosplayers, it was a very new experience and also for the Crunchyroll side. They wanted to put the show together basically ahead of time so they could just have all the clips ready to go right, and they had a live DJ for commentary. They had live reactions from the judges, but we had to get permission for our music, and then we had to make the video submissions well ahead of the actual convention, which was very different. It was a very interesting experience. One thing that I found interesting was that the convention side organized that part of it really well, but they did not think of it like a convention experience for the cosplayers. One of the cosplayers in the group of finalists—there were 30 of us—she came up with an idea and said, “Well let's set up a discord and let's make our own kind of community of the people that are going to be on this show, and everybody was like “that's a great idea yeah!” I think that the organizers said, “Oh in the future we're definitely gonna include this if we ever do another virtual show” and it was one of those things where they were trying to figure it out and it was a fan idea that made a big difference²²¹.

As she outlined her experience, she mentioned the idea of the convention taking advice from the fans towards the production of their virtual convention. This interaction is an example of collaboration between the official staff and the fans, as Crunchyroll Expo considered using a production of those attendees.

²²¹ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

From this respondent's experience, the grassroots origin of the Fanime virtual event is both different and similar to that of Crunchyroll Expo 2020, another convention that had deferred to the next year and had a virtual convention instead. As previously mentioned, Crunchyroll Expo 2020 announced to move online on June 4 ahead of their September 6 thru 8 events. Pulling from this respondent's experience and archival data, Crunchyroll Expo hosted events via their main page, including "stages," which were links to specific types of events.²²² These included a stage for large industry panels, such as Toei panels, another for industry and staff panels, an anime marathon stage, and finally, a stage just for fan panels.²²³ Other events included a "CFX (Crunchyroll Expo) on Demand," an all-day programming streaming channel, and online guest events.²²⁴ Compared to the virtual Fanime 2020, these online events for Crunchyroll Expo 2020 were created and sponsored by the organizing company. The company includes its extensive staff group and use of its already existing online streaming services.²²⁵ Thus Crunchyroll Expo is an alternative model for online events. As a streaming service in its own right, Crunchyroll had the means to move to an online format through their company and established staff. However, as seen in the story above, they were still adjusting to the needs of the fans through their changing of events, like the Cosplay Contest. In the context of this thesis, this offers an alternative view of a different virtual convention for comparative purposes. Explained as a grassroots event, the free fan-run Fanime took place over multiple platforms with individual hosts, with one announcement on the Fanime website for advertisement. On the other

²²² Virtual Crunchyroll Expo, Crunchyroll, June 24, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200904031418/https://expo.crunchyroll.com/>.

²²³ Virtual Crunchyroll Expo.

²²⁴ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

²²⁵ Virtual Crunchyroll Expo.

hand, Crunchyroll Expo had the means to create an entire interface to their online convention, which allowed for open and free access.

Alternatively, due to the pandemic, some small cons began online, like the convention Casa Con, a fully online convention covering multiple fandoms, including anime, video games, and more. Casa Con utilizes Discord to host events, inviting guests from many sources, including voice actors, artists, cosplayers, and academic speakers, to live streaming rooms with attendees.²²⁶ Using Discord as the main form of interaction is different from other online models, which are open for as many people as possible. Instead, by using Discord and online ticketing as “a nod to conventions, as it is a more ‘exclusive’ and ‘private’ event” where the creators state the convention “has a better capacity to become a community.”²²⁷ That idea of community is like the previously discussed ideas of interactivity and another force behind the fan production of the online conventions. As stated on their website, “while a digital experience can never fully replicate the experience of attending a convention in person, we hope to get as close as possible.”²²⁸ Like the virtual Fanime, the creation of Casa Con came from a desire to bring members of the fandom community together, including indie creators and artists.²²⁹ As a virtual convention, the event was put on three times, on June 12, 2020, October 31, 2020, and December 18 to December 20, 2020, with a fourth and final online event planned June 25 to June 27, 2021. These models are more alike in that they were started by fans, though they ultimately differ from each other. Casa Con’s model comes from a desire to mimic conventions in general, with live-streamed panels and guests in a live-stream chat setting. The virtual Fanime was

²²⁶ Casacon.com, *CasaCon*, Casacon.com, 2020, <https://casacon.nardio.net/>.

²²⁷ Ibid, About.

²²⁸ Ibid, About.

²²⁹ Ibid.

designed to mimic a pre-existing event but with a grassroots start, production, and fan-run events. Both of which are different from the industrial virtual CrunchyRoll Expo. These explanations show that the Fanime virtual event was a different model, outside of staff-run or industrial influence. It also exemplifies that these alternative models exist even within virtual renditions of conventions, despite stemming from the same pandemic pressures. In this way, the production of the virtual Fanime was outside of staff organization, but apart from these other models.

When posed with the experience of the Fanime virtual convention, and with Informant #3's experience of another virtual convention, I asked both staff respondents' thoughts on if they felt that in the future of Fanime, or conventions in general, would include virtual events. Both staff had similar thoughts about what should not or cannot be replaced by a virtual convention. As Informant #3 passionately explained, an element that is the most important is the interactivity in the physical space of the convention.²³⁰ Informant #4 questioned the logistics of an entirely virtual convention: "I'm very curious from a technology standpoint and an organizational standpoint how they're going to do it."²³¹ His hesitations were due to his staff experience and insights into the cost of cons and how combining virtual and physical events might require organizational or financial shifting.²³² However, he agreed that virtual events might enable people unable to travel to a physical con to participate. The virtual events model could vary between the grassroots experience of Fanime 2020 or the company, staff-run Crunchyroll Expo.

The grassroots experience of the fan-made virtual Fanime was possible due to the efforts of attendee fans acting on their own accord. Though he planned to be staff, as one of the virtual

²³⁰ Anonymous Respondent #3, interview.

²³¹ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²³² Ibid.

organizers, he acted on his own participation to help in the virtual event. The significance of his perspective illuminates the inner workings of the virtual convention, from its initial concept to the full creation. His experience is the main example of how he, along with the rest of the group, became the producers of the virtual Fanime 2020. Ultimately, the virtual convention acted as a stand-in and only possible through the efforts of fan producers such as the following informant.

3.3.3 Interview with a Virtual Organizer

Informant #4 is someone with a long-running experience (over a decade or so) starting from an attendee, moving to staff, and acting as a virtual event organizer for 2020. Some of his comments regarding his staffing experience are above, but the set of questions for virtual organizers differed. When asked how he became aware of the virtual convention creation, he mentioned the Fanime forums and a Facebook group planning a “pretend you’re at Fanime,” which later developed into the virtual event.²³³ He explained that other fans had come together, inspired by each other, and came up with the idea to have the stand-in with similar events to that of the formal convention. As an organizer, he facilitated several events for the virtual stand-in, including panels on “Cthulhu for President” and “Con Stories” and the video event “Midnight Madness.”²³⁴ These events were virtual editions of those he had run at Fanime in previous years. He utilized the social media platform Twitch to host the events. In contrast to other models, such as Casa Con’s usage of Discord to promote exclusivity, he thoroughly explained that Discord’s limitations (either through live streaming issues or the attendee caps on the chat) for viewers might significantly affect the event in how they intended to hold it as a stand-in for the physical

²³³ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²³⁴ FanimeCon, *FanimeCon 2020 Virtual Events*.

con. He told me that he thought the virtual con was more successful and attracted more participants than the organizers had anticipated.²³⁵ Further, he commented that having more staff assistance or announcements might have helped, but he said the success was primarily thanks to fans' actions and support.²³⁶

An essential element to this virtual convention to remember is that, while an integral part, Informant #4 was one piece of a larger team. Though he had experience in staffing before 2020, he acted independently outside of the staff organization to create his online events. This independent act relates to Eng's observation about fan staffers, where "anime conventions are a place where they can show off their skills and expertise."²³⁷ In this case, Informant #4 shared his usual events during a physical event into the free, virtual convention space. Together with those in the forums and the Facebook group, they created a small virtual con on publicly available platforms. Like the regular staff for the Black and White Ball, other groups created similar adapted events; these were under their own volition and creation, meaning outside of the staff organization. Speaking in consideration to what Lamerichs refers to as "participatory culture," borrowing the term from Jenkins referring to the culture that is a shared activity requiring participation, this shift of this relationship runs along the lines of that participation, but where attendees moved into the role of the producer of the convention.²³⁸ Lamerichs further uses Jenkin's argument to support this idea, where increased dialogue between users and producers can shape a new public sphere.²³⁹ This consistent interaction between users and producers, or in

²³⁵ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Eng, "Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture," 175.

²³⁸ Lamerichs, *Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence*.

²³⁹ Ibid, 169.

this case attendees or staff, help to shape the overall convention, thereby opening the door for a version of that convention to be shaped by either attendees or staff. For my argument, this supports that attendee fans, as participants within the structure, can build into that structure despite their engagement being primarily on the outside of the staff organization. It was due to the deferral of the convention that fans moved into positions to create the virtual convention. This shift is further explained by Yamato's findings in their study of Malaysian anime conventions, where staff and panelists act as producers and attendees as consumers, who assert that attendees often move into the role of producer, such as when running a panel.²⁴⁰ The elements of productivity are already present within conventions and support my argument through these examples and from the explanations of my respondent, that fans are able to act as producers of the convention as well as producers within the convention (such as panelists or artists).

For Informant #4, who had attended Fanime since the early 2000s, his engagement level had moved from attendee to official staff, and again when it came to the virtual convention. After the experience, he shared thoughts about the future of the con in terms of continuing with virtual events. To give his opinion, he explained Fanime's industry connections with companies like Crunchyroll or Funimation, which shifted contractual agreements and video programming into an alternative direction from older, on-site equipment programming.²⁴¹ As an already-existing element of the convention model that includes industry, he predicted that the number of virtual and hybrid events would increase but would require different structures, much like the model set up CrunchyRoll Expo facilitated by similar models to the streaming service.²⁴² He stated, "I

²⁴⁰ Yamato, "Construction of discursive fandom."

²⁴¹ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

²⁴² Ibid.

respect that different groups are trying different things. So just throwing stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks, and I respect that, but that also means with that approach you're going to have a lot of heartburn along the way.”²⁴³ Therefore, he suggested that any virtual elements would need to be well-planned if used in tandem with a physical space but thought many people would likely watch them.²⁴⁴ However, he stated that “hosting a virtual event when you're running a physical event is incredibly expensive” and “to make a virtual event, it's going to take even more bandwidth, and, unless convention centers are willing to be more reasonable with those prices, I think that will actually be the biggest gating factor for a majority of anime conventions.”²⁴⁵ Regardless of his connection to the virtual convention, he still longed for the interactivity afforded by in-person conventions and claimed that as inspiration for assisting with the virtual convention.

Fans moving from the role of attendee into producers to create the virtual convention required coming together of a community and internal drive to facilitate the virtual space for others. To use Jenkins’ words as an explanation for this phenomenon, “engaging within a participatory culture requires and fosters skills and knowledge, and it provides a safe space with which to experiment with new passions or activities.”²⁴⁶ Pertaining to the virtual convention, this was a space created by members within the fandom and part of the participatory culture, who chose to engage and produce on their passion for creating a virtual stand-in for a deferred event. Events put on mimicked those at the physical convention as a way to link back to the original event and known model. However, while it was a smaller-scale online event, these organizers

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Henry Jenkins, “Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture,” In *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2018).

came together in panels and live-streams to engage with other fans of not just anime or Japanese culture but of Fanime itself. Per the information from the virtual organizer, it was the drive to have a stand-in for Fanime during a year of canceled conventions that sparked the coming together of that community of producers. It was in the absence of an official convention, due to the adherence to pandemic guidelines and deferment, that let fan producers move into that space, usually belonging to the staff due to many reasons.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION: FANIME AS A FAN PRODUCTION

In the lost year of anime conventions, the disruption of Fanime 2020 due to the unprecedented pandemic and adherence to health guidelines left open a gap for fans to act as producers of their virtual version of the convention. While the concept of fans as producers is not new, it is most often referring to concepts like art, fanfiction, and cosplay, while usually placed in a conversation regarding fans as consumers or producers. When translated into the vernacular of conventions, this can refer to attendees and staff. As artists and cosplayers, attendees can act as producers, though this still remains in the realm of the attendee, whereas the convention organization falls to the staff structures (as explained at length previously). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, anime conventions responded to new guidelines, where many organizing parties decided to either cancel or defer their events to the following year. While Fanime initially announced that the convention would go on, they also agreed to defer to the following year in order to protect their attendees and adhere to CDC guidelines. Behind that announcement, fans came together to push for an online event, ending in creating and cultivating a grassroots fan-run virtual Fanime.

Fanime was an anime convention that rose out of anime fan clubs, formed as interest in Japanese culture flourished and fans sought out spaces, acting as producers of first conventions as gatherings to share in that similar interest. Around that formation, fansubbers served as producers and distributors of unlicensed anime, helping those early anime clubs gain access to a greater number of titles coming from Japan. These instances are examples of fans acting as producers and curators of their fandom, from their fan clubs and gathering to bring other like-minded fans together as part of a bigger community. As one of those communities, Fanime boasts twenty-five years of uninterrupted conventions, slowly building on its evolving model to include more Japanese-related elements of culture, music, media, and more. While the

convention model evolved, so did the staff organization to match the increasing interest, events, and attendance. With these well-established models, Fanime attendees expect a certain type of well-rounded event with a level of staff and professionalism to match. However, the COVID-19 guidelines and regulations disrupted the convention for 2020 and also the Fanime model. Rising from that disruption, fans came together outside of staff organization to create their stand-in, a virtual version for Fanime 2020.

As the staff acted based on the CDC guidelines, announcements of staying open to the eventual deferment unfolded from March to mid-April, about a month before the event. From my participant observation of social media posts and interview data, attendees relayed their concern, appreciation, and strong loyalty ties to the convention. For my interview respondents, many pointed out that Fanime was a hub for their fandom, with a network of friends and other like-minded fans. With the disruption from the pandemic, Fanime was officially planned to postpone until 2021. However, through the desire to have a “pretend Fanime,” which started from a group on Facebook and in the Fanime forums, this fan group acting independently of the staff organization came together to put on the event through different online formats.²⁴⁷ This act was an intent to mimic the live event and provide a space for their fellow anime fans and Fanime peers to share in events to feel closer to the official event.

The virtual style of Fanime seen in 2020 was the first of its kind and a model that will not happen again. Per the newest announcement on February 21, 2021, the Fanime Chair Team announced: “We are announcing that FanimeCon 2021 will be entirely virtual. This will be unlike any convention that we have planned before. We are tailoring many of our traditionally

²⁴⁷ Anonymous Respondent #4, interview.

in-person events to fit a virtual audience and will share more details as this develops.”²⁴⁸ This announcement is indicative that Fanime 2021 will be a staff-run virtual con and an entirely different model than the fan-run virtual Fanime of 2020. Thus the 2020 convention remains a singular model of the first virtual version of Fanime. While it is impossible to predict the future of conventions with virtual models, with more conventions like Fanime, Crunchyroll Expo, or Casa Con happening online during this time, it is likely that with a continuing pandemic that the structure will continue to shift.

This thesis centers around the case study of Fanime 2020 in conjunction with COVID-19 pivots as an example of shifting attendee fans into the role of organizers. With the events leading up to the convention, fans took over for staff to produce a free fan event under the banner of the official Fanime, though apart from its organizing parties. This is not to devalue the fantastic contributions of the volunteer staff but to highlight the shifting of physical events to online spaces through attendee fans. Personal drive, coupled with the many canceled events, were driving factors for fans to find new avenues for the convention. One major factor was the concept of the fandom community. As summed up by Eriko Yamato, “despite enormous changes in the surrounding technological environment, the in-person community still mattered for the fans of every generation who traveled to the convention.”²⁴⁹ Thus the virtual convention acted as a stand-in for that community, with later hopes that the convention would return in its previous physical format.

Fanime 2020 will be a single moment in time, never to be replicated and only a byproduct of the current pandemic. Anime conventions come from a history of fan producers and

²⁴⁸ FanimeCon, *FanimeCon 2021 Announcement*, FanimeCon.com, Accessed 2021, <https://www.fanime.com/news/fanimecon-2021-announcement/>.

²⁴⁹ Yamato, “Construction of discursive fandom,” 471.

groups and are now considered a hub for interactivity that connects usually disconnected members of fandom and serves many purposes. While there is always emphasis on Japanese media and cultural elements, cons are at the base, a fan event. With the fans who took over for Fanime, they provided a means for the convention to continue during the lost year of conventions that marked cancellations, deferrals, and a new virtual convention mode. The significance of this project is in that individualized version of the virtual convention. By looking at Fanime, we get a look at a sudden shift in the model brought on by outside forces—a true “By Fans, For Fans” convention in the face of a global pandemic.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. Which age group are you in? [18-24] [24-30] [30-36] [36-42] [42-50] [50 and older]
3. What area do you live in? (State, county, city – no full addresses, please!)
4. For FanimeCon 2020, which group did you fall under?
 - a. [Attendee] – Section 2 Questions
 - b. [Staff] – Section 3 Questions
 - c. [Virtual Event Organizer] – Section 4 Questions
5. What is your experience with anime conventions?
6. How long have you attended FanimeCon?
7. How did you decide to go to FanimeCon specifically?
8. How were your experiences with FanimeCon prior to 2020? (Was it enjoyable? Favorite parts? Things that may need changing?)
9. How have conventions been for your understanding of Japanese Culture? Did you learn more by going to them than you did prior?
10. If you've attended any virtual conventions in the past year, how was the experience? Would you want a similar virtual experience for FanimeCon?

Attendee Section:

11. Before the announcement of the cancellation, were you already pre-registered for the convention?
12. Were you aware of the announcements from any of the official FanimeCon correspondence regarding changes based on COVID-19?
13. If you did see the announcements, how concerned were you regarding COVID-19 and the conventions' first announcement that it would try to stay open?
14. How did the eventual cancellation affect you?
15. How was FanimeCon's dealing with the cancellation, in your opinion?

16. Were you aware of the stand-in, mini virtual convention on the weekend of FanimeCon 2020? If yes, how successful do you think the stand-in virtual convention was? If no, how do you think they can improve communication with attendees?
17. How do you think anime conventions, FanimeCon included, will be in the future for attendees? (i.e., Do you think there will be more virtual elements?)
18. What do you think are elements that a physical anime convention has over a virtual convention? Should conventions be solely online?

Staff Section

19. How long have you staffed for FanimeCon? How has the experience been?
20. Were you an attendee before staffing?
21. What department or position were you expected to be under/have for FanimeCon 2020?
22. How concerned were you regarding COVID-19 and the convention being organized?
23. How did you react to the initial announcement that the convention would remain open?
24. As Staff, were you aware of the ongoings of how the decisions were being made regarding COVID-19? (For instance, was there good communication regarding this?)
25. Were you aware of the public announcements being made for attendees on any of the FanimeCon official platforms?
26. How did you learn about the eventual cancellation?
27. Were you aware of the virtual stand-in convention? If you were, did you help at all, and how successful do you think it was? If you were not, how do you think FanimeCon might have helped spread the word?
28. How do you think the organization of FanimeCon will change in the future after COVID-19?

Virtual Event Organizer Section

29. Were you previously going to attend or staff for FanimeCon 2020?
30. How did you first hear about the virtual convention? How did you come to the decision to hold your virtual event?

31. Did you have any concerns about organizing a fan-run event rather than one made by the staff? How did you expect interest/participation to be for your event?
32. How did your event turn out? Would you say the virtual convention was a success? If yes, how so? How do you feel about the FanimeCon official response/announcements for the virtual convention? (i.e., Were they useful? Were you aware of them?)
33. Would you consider running more virtual events for FanimeCon in the future? Why?
34. How do you think virtual elements will affect FanimeCon in the future?

Final Question

35. Do you have any other comments or thoughts?

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