

The Influence of Japanese Animation on *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

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Western animation and Japanese anime have been cross-pollinating each other since the early days. Osamu Tezuka, often called the father of Japanese *manga* (comics), was greatly influenced by the works of Walt Disney. Disney animators in the 1990s were, in turn, greatly inspired by Tezuka, Miyazaki and Studio GAINAX. Many recent Western animated TV series have a strong anime influence as well: *Samurai Jack*, Genndy Tartakovsky's animated *Star Wars: Clone Wars* series, *X-Men: Evolution*, *Teen Titans*, *Batman Beyond*, *The Spectacular Spiderman*, *Totally Spies!* and the focus of this paper, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.



Avatar is an astounding success story. A product of Nickelodeon, an entity usually associated with shows like *Rugrats*, *Spongebob Squarepants* and *Dora the Explorer*, *Avatar* is a radical departure from the studio's usual fare. Created and produced by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, veterans of Film Roman programs like *King of the Hill* and *Family Guy*, the show was conceived as a three-season tale, with an overarching plotline, and very strong, serial story-telling. It features extremely mature and complicated themes (genocide, responsibility, team-work, respect and being true to your moral ideals – even when respected authority figures insist you're wrong), despite the target demographic being children aged six to eleven¹.

¹ Nicole Parker, Sr. Director of Communications at Nickelodeon.

The series is critically lauded; received an Emmy in 2007, five Annie awards spanning 2006 to 2009², as well as being nominated for an additional Emmy in 2007 and two additional Annie nominations³. It was also a ratings juggernaut for Nickelodeon.

“Avatar... is ranked among the top 10 animated properties on commercial television among boys 2-11 and boys 6-11...The series reaches a total of 18.4 million total viewers...including 8.9 million kids 2-11 and 5.8 million kids 6-11. In [the 4th quarter of 2006], Avatar was the highest-rated animated program on all TV (including broadcast nets and all cable nets) with Boys 9-14.”⁴

Nickelodeon reports that the show also drew adult viewers – one of them being M. Night Shyamalan, who approached Nickelodeon and pitched an idea for a trilogy of live action *Avatar* films, directed by him and executive produced by DiMartino and Konietzko. The influence of Japanese anime is obvious: “We thought the anime style would suit the storyline very well.”⁵ However, DiMartino and Konietzko understood that there is more to the “anime style” than just character designs. Dramatic acting and a willingness to tackle adult topics are what makes anime so appealing to so many people around the globe, in all different age groups. Other shows before *Avatar* have imported the look of the characters, but ignored all the rest, which is arguably where the actual merit of anime lays.

Avatar also followed a marketing model that has much more in common with Japanese anime shows than other Western programs. *Avatar* aired new episodes mainly during prime-time hours, allowing families to watch the program together. Most anime programs in Japan air in prime-time slots, and watching them is a family affair⁶, so even shows aimed more towards children need to be complex and interesting enough to entertain their parents as well.

In order to learn from *Avatar*’s success, it is necessary to analyze every aspect of it. What artistic and commercial methods were used; how did it attract a wider and more mature audience? What can the American animation industry learn from this success?

PLOT & WORLD-BUILDING

Avatar is an epic martial-arts action comedy. A concise summary of the plot is given at the beginning of each episode,

“Water, Earth, Fire, Air. Long ago, the four nations lived together in harmony. Then everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked. Only the Avatar, master of all four elements could stop them, but when the world needed him most, he vanished. A hundred years passed and my brother and I discovered the new Avatar, an airbender named Aang. And although his airbending skills are great, he still has a lot to learn before he’s ready to save anyone. But I believe Aang can save the world.”

² Best Storyboarding in an Animated Television Production (2006), Best Character Animation in a Television Production and Best Directing in an Animated Television Production (2007), and Best Animated Television Production Produced for Children and Best Directing in an Animated Television Production or Short Form (2009).

³ Nominated for “Outstanding Animated Program (For Programming Less Than One Hour)” Emmy in 2007 and (Best Animated Television Production and Best Writing in an Animated Television Production) in 2006

⁴ Nickelodeon press release 11/4/2007 <http://www.avatarspiritmedia.net/nickpressrelease.php>

⁵ Summer Mullins, “An interview with Bryan Konietzko and Michael DiMartino”, *Anime Insider* #39. p.74.

⁶ “Japan does not have a Saturday-morning children’s TV ghetto, and most TV cartoons run for at least twenty-six weekly prime-time episodes. Popular programs may run for fifty-two episodes or more.” Fred Patten, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of essays and Reviews* (Berkeley; Stone Bridge Press, 2004), 91.

The fantasy world of Avatar is rich; it has a wide range of cultural influences, from India, Alaskan Inuit to China to Tibet to Persia to 20th century Imperial Japan⁷. Each nation has a unique flavor that is usually a mix of several different cultures but they all have some things in common. They each identify with a single natural element and some members of each nation are able to manipulate their element through various martial arts disciplines. This is called “bending” and the individuals who are capable of doing this are called “benders”.

Aang, the main character, is a twelve year old boy and also the Avatar, a divine bridge between the spirit world and the human world. The Avatar is a human spirit that, like a Bodhisattva, has chosen an endless cycle of reincarnation rather than to reach personal Nirvana, in order to help others find enlightenment and to protect the balance of the world and the balance between the four nations. The Avatar lives in a cycle – being reincarnated from one elemental tribe to the next in each lifetime. What sets the Avatar apart from the other people of this world, aside from their spiritual powers and long lifetimes of experience is the fact that they are able to learn to “bend” all four of the elements. Regular mortals are only capable of learning a single style. In each lifetime the Avatar must re-learn all four styles and learn what it means to be human, in order to remain humble and sympathetic towards those they are meant to help.

Aang, Katara and Sokka of the Water Tribe begin an epic journey together, making many friends, allies and enemies as Aang struggles to master the other three elements, and gain the strength of body, heart and mind to defeat the leader of the Fire Nation, Firelord Ozai who is determined to subjugate the rest of the planet to the will of the Fire Nation.

This summary only gives the most basic overview of the plot – it doesn’t touch on the character arcs of the two other main characters, Katara and Sokka, and barely hints at the large cast of secondary characters that are crucially tied to the plot and the development of Aang and the other two leads. A great deal of the focus is on gradually revealing character motivation, back-story and constant world-building.

In addition to all that character development, each episode has its own, self-contained mini-plot, comedy relief, action sequences and scenes that contribute to the overall plot of the series. The characters are very human: Aang’s feelings are easy for viewers to relate to, because his fears and problems are the same that all people may face at one time or another in their lives (being different, being ostracized, fear and trauma of losing loved ones, and anxiety about the future and responsibility). The viewers also find themselves relating strongly to the “villain”, Zuko, due to the parallel drawn between him and Aang. It greatly reinforces the idea even those who seem to be our greatest enemies can be just like us, with exactly the same fears and concerns about life. These complex emotional and moral concepts draw adults as well as children to the show. These characters are not rendered in black and white, good vs. evil terms, they seem as real as the best characters from a live action program.

⁷ Complete with iron, steam-powered ships and tanks, mandatory public schooling/indoctrination for children, and beach-wear that resembles 1950s swimsuits, although the rest of the Fire Nation culture remains decidedly traditional in clothing, architecture, art and music.

SERIAL, FINITE STORY-TELLING

Avatar was planned for three seasons (60 episodes over three years) and had a very firm “The End” attached to the last episode. This is very different from typical American animated TV programs, and much more similar to the style of narrative found in Japanese anime.

“Today, anime...are usually a single story rather than a series of largely disconnected episodes. Even shows that have separate stories in each episode usually tie them together with a subplot for the entire season...However this...means that once the story is over, the show is over. For Japanese television, long multiyear programs are the exception; the norm is shows that last three or six months and occasionally a full year or two.”⁸

American TV animation tends to be constructed in an episodic way, where at the end of every episode characters are “reset” to their default status. This may allow for a few select characters to reach an iconic, “classical” status, however it prevents viewers from deeply relating to the characters, because they are not as alive or as real as we are. They don’t change, they don’t age, they don’t learn. When viewers see a narrative movie or a series, ideally they should feel as if the character has overcome some obstacle by the end, has grown or changed in some way. If a character remains the same as before, it may be likeable and popular, but it probably won’t provoke a deep emotional reaction.

Avatar makes excellent use of its time limit, telling a tremendous amount of story in three 20-episode seasons. This limited nature let the creators produce a work that allowed for developing characters and a wildly fluctuating plot. The overall plot of *Avatar* is always the same: Aang must save the world from the Fire Nation. But in each season the details and the relationships between the characters change so greatly that someone hearing about it for the first time may desire a flow-chart to explain who is chasing who and why. This kind of intricate complexity is a common staple of Japanese anime, and is seen in screwball comedies like *Ranma ½* or action drama shows like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

The fact that Konietzko and DiMartino had all of this complexity and the end of the plot planned from the outset allowed them to concentrate their talents and funds towards creating the best possible visuals, music and voice acting, without any concerns about how they could keep the story going ten years from now. After the last episode Aang’s story is over, and the viewers are left with a feeling of closure, as if they, too, had accomplished something along with Aang.

MUSIC

Animated TV shows normally have a composer record a number of themes (action, comedy, drama, and individual character themes), and then a music editor cuts or loops the tracks to suit each episode as they are made. In *Avatar*, Konietzko and DiMartino wanted every episode to have a unique musical score, tailored to fit the action and to create the greatest impact on the viewer, because they understood that music can make or break an animated production. Viewers respond to music’s stresses, dissonances and harmonies intuitively, at any age. Music can help express storyline, character, color, emotion and other cinematic elements; make them seem more alive, give them greater impact. Richard Williams said: “I think of animation as

⁸ Mark MacWilliams and others, *Japanese Visual Culture* (Armonk, NY, London; M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 60.

drawn music. It's very similar; the timing is similar – the passion, the contrast, how you join things together interestingly.”⁹ According to Jeremy Zuckerman, one of the composers of *Avatar*, an executive in charge of production on *Avatar* told him: “make the sad scenes heartbreaking, make the scary scenes terrifying, make the funny scenes hilarious...”. Basically, don't hold back - make *Avatar* as emotionally dynamic as possible.”¹⁰

There are still a great number of themes used, but they're re-recorded and tweaked by composers Zuckerman and Wynn for each and every episode to create a unique score. Much of the instrumentation is taken from their sample library but all of the ethnic instruments were performed live. They even recorded a live taiko ensemble to create their own taiko sample library to draw from.

“In the beginning we were using sampled phrases but it quickly became clear that the show required more depth. I studied Guzheng and Pipa with a master Chinese musician and got a duduk and some other ethnic instruments.”¹¹

Another reason for the unusual focus on music in the series is that Konietzko is also a musician himself, so he and DiMartino were extremely involved in the composing process. Konietzko and Wynn were old friends and roommates when they began working on the series, which allowed for an intense collaboration,

“Sometimes the instructions are very specific down to instrumentation and sometimes they give us more of an emotional direction... [Konietzko] really gets it. He's actually the one who came up with the idea of using a diverse ethnic instrumentation.”¹²

Konietzko and DiMartino went all-out for the four episode series finale, and Zuckerman and Wynn's compositions were performed by a live 16-piece string ensemble. Konietzko and DiMartino made conscious decisions to downplay the exciting action aspects of some battle scenes:

“...because we knew there'd be so much fire and explosions and loud sounds [in the rest of the episode] that for that scene we...push[ed] the sound effects...very quiet and let this tragic music play and be in the fore-front, to contrast...[the loud, exciting action of Aang's battle]”¹³

Not only has the soundtrack served the series well, but there has been a great outcry from the fans, yearning for a CD release¹⁴. This is not a common practice for American TV animation, but it is a huge part of the marketing of Japanese anime. Almost every series released in Japan comes along with a soundtrack of some sort. Interestingly, this practice can be traced back to the 1970s and the release of the American film *Star Wars*. One of the major merchandizing successes was the symphonic suite arrangement of the John Williams score in

⁹ Dean K. Lennert, “An Interview with Richard Williams.” *Animation World Magazine*, http://mag.awn.com/index.php?article_no=1291 (2002), accessed 10 March 2009

¹⁰ Mike Brennan, “An Interview with Jeremy Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn.” *SoundtrackNet*, <http://soundtrack.net/features/article/?id=252> (2008), accessed 10 March 2009

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Tory Mell, “SDCC 08: Avatar Creators Interview Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko talk *Airbender*.” *IGN*, <http://tv.ign.com/articles/894/894105p1.html> (2008), accessed 10 March 2009

¹⁴ The online petition for an *Avatar* soundtrack release: http://www.petitiononline.com/mod_perl/signed.cgi?avatarST accessed 10 March 2009

a sophisticated album rather than a typical sci-fi movie-music package. This success inspired the Japanese, and they released a similar symphonic album for their own 1970s sci-fi hit (although theirs was animated), *Space Battleship Yamato*. This album was so successful that it is still in print today. Other programs quickly followed suit, and today there are instrumental soundtracks available for almost every program that has ever hit the airwaves, even the most obscure ones.

A great number of the *Avatar* viewers are no doubt also fans of Japanese anime, and if they weren't before, *Avatar* may send them looking for other, similar programs, thus serving as a gateway into anime shows and manga comics. The end result is that while the American shows they used to watch didn't have soundtracks they can buy, the Japanese ones do, and their consumption habits will reflect this.

"The success of single-program soundtracks...led to an increased emphasis on good music that could also be sold as recordings. Eventually it became common for a significant amount of high-quality original music to be included in a series; in fact, some television shows included so many songs and tunes that most were only heard once in the series."¹⁵

There is a void in marketing in America right now, where viewers want certain products – soundtracks, DVD box sets, etc., but American production companies are not providing them, and are losing out on sales. Some American shows are not available on DVD and so people resort buying bootlegged DVDs from overseas, probably made from VHS tapings of the shows. Nickelodeon avoided this problem by immediately releasing *Avatar* on DVD and in easily-consumable DVD box sets, but the fact that Nickelodeon failed to release a soundtrack during the height of the show's popularity was a definite miscalculation.

DESIGN AND RESEARCH

The thorough world-building of *Avatar* extends to the varied and detailed costumes, character designs, wacky animals, backgrounds, language, music, customs and the Chinese calligraphy. Konietzko and DiMartino were so invested in creating an immersive, exotic world for the viewers that they even had a cultural consultant (Edwin Zane, former vice president of MANAA¹⁶), a martial arts consultant/action coordinator (Sifu Kisu), a martial arts coordinator/videographer (Lisa Wahlander) and a specialist in Chinese calligraphy who provided all the Chinese text and translations (Siu-Leung Lee, PhD) because by design there is no English text anywhere in *Avatar*, except for the credits and the main title¹⁷. Background Supervisor Elsa Garagarza goes into detail about Konietzko and DiMartino's devotion to research:

"The show was for the most part inspired by Chinese culture...Mike and Bryan went to China and took a great deal of pictures of Beijing that became our library...We saw a lot of Chinese movies, both recent and old...Everything was referenced to look authentic."¹⁸

¹⁵ Mark MacWilliams and others, *Japanese Visual Culture* (Armonk, NY, London; M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 52.

¹⁶ Media Action Network for Asian Americans <http://www.manaa.org/>

¹⁷ The main title is subtitled with Chinese text, translating the word *Avatar* to "The Divine Medium who had descended upon the Mortal World".

¹⁸ Evan Miller, "The Gallery – Elsa Garagarza." *Anime News Network*, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/the-gallery/2009-01-31> (2009) accessed 10 March 2009

According to a TV Guide article, Konietzko also traveled to Iceland prior to season three to study the landscape and bring back inspirational photographs to help the rest of the crew design the volcanic environment of the Fire Nation.

This level of effort is usually only seen in animated feature films in the US. The payoff at the end is that the audience can sense the “reality” of this world that has been created for them; can relate to it, and are invested in it. An animated feature film may have a similar effect, but since it only lasts for about an hour and a half, the audience doesn’t really take it away with them as much as a show that they watch once a week for three years.

VOICE-ACTING

In Japanese animation, voices are usually recorded after the animation is finished; in American animation, and in *Avatar* in particular, voices are recorded first to give the animators something to animate to. This is in contrast to the frequent anime practice of relying on more symbolic acting, where certain facial expressions and visual symbols such as sweat drops, quivering eyes and throbbing vein marks are used to express certain emotions. Usually American animation approaches each character uniquely and animates them based on how *that* specific character would be angry, sad or happy, etc. *Avatar* does make use of these visual clichés too, but applies them in humorous ways. The quality of the vocal performances in *Avatar* definitely benefit from using the Western style of recording, as well as from recording the cast in an ensemble whenever possible¹⁹.

There are a few celebrity voices in *Avatar* (such as Dante Basco, Mark Hamill and Jason Isaacs); some young upcoming actors that kids may recognize (Mae Whitman, Jack De Sena), as well as professional voice actors (Mako, Dee Bradley Baker, Grey DeLisle).

Casting voice actors in Japan is very different from the usual American practice. This is due to the fact that “60% of the world's animated-cartoon series are made in Japan”²⁰ which makes it no surprise that Japan has a huge market for voice-over work. There are even specialty magazines catering to the fans of voice actors, such as *Voice Animage*. Voice actors in Japan frequently start in TV anime and then achieve fame on a national level and develop full-time careers. American voice actors rarely become so well-known.

Disney started a trend of using famous live-action actors to draw audiences to their films with *The Jungle Book*, and took it to a new level with *Aladdin*. The opposite trend has been alive and well in Japan for decades now, with famous voice actors like Megumi Hayashibara or Kappei Yamaguchi being major draws for many fans that follow their careers and will watch a new program simply because they (or some other favorite voice actor) are in it.

¹⁹ “I’m of the mind that a large part of an actor’s performance comes from reacting...and it’s hard to react when there’s no performer there to act with.” Acastus, “Interview with Voice Director Andrea Romano (part 1 of 3)” *Avatarspirit.net* <http://www.avatarspiritmedia.net/interviews.php?id=21> accessed 10 March 2009

²⁰ Jim Frederick, “What’s Right with Japan.” *Time Asia*, http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/cool_japan/story.html accessed 10 March 2009

Avatar did not cash in on this possible promotional avenue because, at least for the moment, TV voice actors simply don't have that kind of star power in the US. If animation were to develop into a real booming market the way it is in Japan, we would surely see a rise in the popularity and fame of professional voice actors as well.

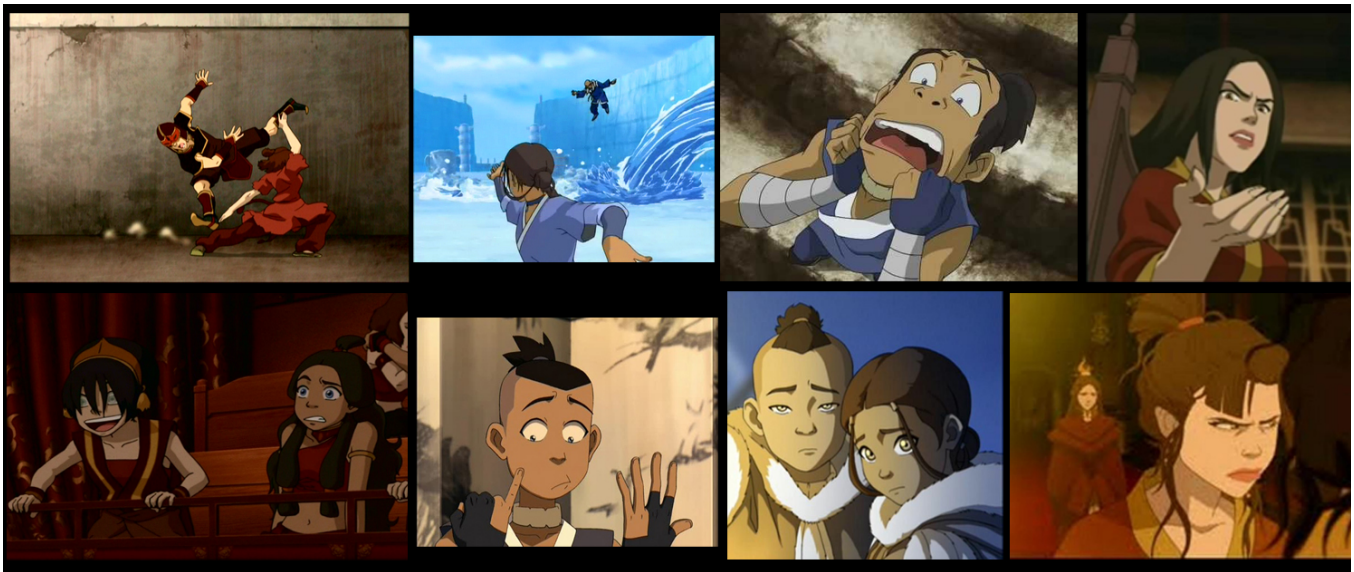
ANIMATION

The animation in *Avatar* was done mostly overseas by Korean animation studios, which is a very common practice for both American and Japanese TV shows these days. In the case of *Avatar* the quality of the animation produced is much higher than most American programs that are outsourced to Korea.

This is largely due to Konietzko and DiMartino finding exceptionally good studios to work with and developing a close relationship with them and by encouraging the Korean artists to actually function as animators and artists, not just drones.

"...Konietzko and...DiMartino, traveled to Korea specifically to recruit the talented team of artists after being thoroughly impressed with their work on the beautifully animated Korean feature film *Wonderful Days*. Armed with nothing more than a 20-page plan and a 3-minute animated sample of the *Avatar* characters, he was able to convince the artists to work on the series."²¹

Avatar also marks the first time that Korean animators have won an Emmy award or an Annie award for their artistic contributions.²²



Also, the *Avatar* crew in America went the extra mile to provide the Korean animators with as much reference footage and artistic guidance as possible, something that Disney feature

²¹ Sunnie Jung and Laura Leon, "A Renaissance in Korean Animation." *F.A.M.E. 'US Magazine*, http://www.fame-us.org/1007_koreandirectors.html accessed 10 March 2009

²² Sang Jin Kim of MOI Animation received an Emmy Award in the category of Best Individual in Character Animation under 30 minutes show in September 2006. Jae Myung Yoo of JM Animation won an Annie Award in January 2007 for Best Individual in Character Animation in a Television Production.

films started with *Snow White*, but that is not used as often in television programs due to budget constraints. According to Director Giancarlo Volpe, they begin with a script, then record dialogue, and then the storyboard artists use the dialogue as a basis for their boards.

“We also have several kung fu sessions per episode, where we meet with Sifu Kisu of the Harmonious Fist...We video tape the whole meeting, so that both the storyboard artists and overseas animators can reference it...”²³

In addition to all this, the storyboards of *Avatar* are quite detailed, and the artists frequently include key poses for the Korean animators to reference in “...kung fu sequences, or heavy acting sequences. To get very precise nuances of expression and emotion...[they’ll] often include an extra pose or so during a line delivery...”²⁴ This sort of emphasis on character animation is uniquely Western in style, as Japanese anime often focuses more on backgrounds, visual design details, and cinematography.

Avatar is exceptional for mixing the greatest strengths of the two styles – Western-style character animation with a focus on squash and stretch, intense research, and use live-action footage for reference; and Japanese-style visual richness in color, background, camera movements and visual storytelling cues. There are many times, in the best episodes of *Avatar*, where it looks more like a freeze-frame from a Miyazaki film, rather than a frame from a television program.



MARKETING

Nickelodeon’s marketing strategy was in many ways similar to the techniques used by Japanese manga-anime franchises.

For example, the monthly manga magazine *Nakayoshi* has developed a “media-mix” strategy, utilizing their magazine, television shows, character merchandising and events to promote a new brand. For the international hit *Sailor Moon*,

²³ Unbridled Joy of Flight, “Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 3 of 3).” *Avatarspirit.net*, <http://www.avatarspiritmedia.net/interviews.php?id=7> accessed 10 March 2009

²⁴ “Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 2 of 3)” <http://www.avatarspiritmedia.net/interviews.php?id=6>

“...the basic story was determined in editorial meetings nearly a year before publication, and a coordinated media offensive was developed. The animated series started up after the second episode of the written story...Peak sales seasons in this genre are...[new year, beginning of the school year and summer vacation]...so the *Sailor Moon* plot was designed to have exciting episodes hit at just these times.”²⁵

Nickelodeon heavily advertised *Avatar* whenever a major event was coming up, often playing two or more new episodes back-to-back and calling them “Avatar TV movies”. A major hook for viewers was the release of several free online games with special unlockable content, such as *Avatar* comics that filled in gaps between episodes, and comedy shorts done in the Japanese “super deformed” style. To unlock this content viewers had to watch the TV broadcasts of the show where passwords and game hints would be aired. There were also toy lines, DVD releases, video games, books, a collectable trading card game, and contests that required the viewers to tune in as well.

Compared to the average American animated TV show, this was quite a bit of marketing, but it is just average for most big anime franchises. Nickelodeon President, Cyma Zarghami stated: “If we do this right, it could become our Harry Potter...we have the opportunity to create a different kind of loyal audience that will follow *Avatar* here, there and everywhere.”²⁶

FAN CULTURE

With the arrival of the internet, online fan communities have become a very important part of the success of an anime. The *Avatar* fandom has a lot in common with a typical anime fandom. Nickelodeon is aware of the immense amount of online activity,

“Fans are responsive on Nick.com as well, where the message boards hold two out of the top five spots this year on the site...Avatar games are also among the most popular...[with] a total of 70 million game plays...The Avatar show page has generated 12 million visits, ranking within the top five properties on Nick.com...[Avatar] has generated more than 34 million streams...On Nicktropolis...the six rooms within the Avatar environment combined have generated 17.5 million visits-to-date”²⁷

According to Gwen Moscoe, the legal face of avatarspirit.net²⁸, during the height of the show’s popularity they generated a hundred thousand unique hits a month. Moscoe, a pharmacist by trade, first entered anime fandom back in the 1980s, but gradually grew out of touch as time went on. The 1990s *Batman: The Animated Series* was the show that brought her attention back to animation, due to its mature nature and serious storytelling. The anime-inspired *Teen Titans* that followed some years later is what got her into the online fan community but it was *Avatar* that inspired her and several of her friends in the titansgo.net forums to make a website of their own, dedicated to Avatar. They wanted to facilitate more mature and intellectual conversations about the show in their forums by providing a mature atmosphere and cataloguing details about the show such as episode transcripts, screenshots and cast and crew details.

²⁵ Frederick L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings of Modern Manga*, (Berkeley; Stone Bridge Press, 1996), 93.

²⁶ David Lieberman, “Nickelodeon pins hopes on ‘Avatar’.” *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2007-09-20-avatar_N.htm (2007), accessed 10 March 2009

²⁷ Nickelodeon press release 11/4/2007 <http://www.avatarspiritmedia.net/nickpressrelease.php>

²⁸ One of the most well-known Avatar fansites.

Moscoe is an excellent example of what the Japanese anime producers have cultivated in their viewers: fans that will move on from one program to the next, persistent viewers who will return for the next new thing (provided it catches their attention). It has been said that the anime and manga industries have “grown up” with their audience, that in the 1970s they were primarily geared at children, and as those children grew up, rather than consign themselves to the idea that their viewers had outgrown animation and were lost to them, Japanese producers instead produced new programs in the 1980s that were aimed at teenagers, and programs aimed at adults in the 1990s. The children’s programs still exist and are still produced, but the Japanese producers of anime realized there was no reason to limit themselves, no reason that adults could not watch animation, provided the content was something that interested them. The strategy of cultivating a devoted fan base helps enlarge and include more viewers for future shows of similar nature.

CONCLUSION

There was a great internal drive from Konietzko and DiMartino to make something special and outstanding, and to create a work of substance that viewers would really be able to appreciate: “Bryan and I set out to create a show with tons of heart, humor, action and drama; a show that would appeal to kids and adults and boys and girls; and a show that raised the bar for American animation.”²⁹ When asked what they would tell older viewers to draw them into the show, DiMartino replied: “If you're into *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, or any of those expansive worlds that draw on mythology and epic storytelling, then you'll probably like *Avatar* too.”³⁰

“The unique traits of Japanese animation that have made it so accessible today...[are] the Japanese acceptance of cartoon animation as a medium of cinematic storytelling for all age and interest groups, rather than just for children...Thus the Japanese are producing dramatic theatrical and televised...[shows] aimed at teens and adults, using animation...The medium of animation is better suited to plots that would require enormous budgets for elaborate sets and special effects in live action.”³¹

Avatar was a huge hit due to its extremely high quality in every aspect of production, as well as Konietzko and DiMartino’s careful combination of all the best qualities of Japanese anime and American animation. The key to the success was the quality of the content, not the nature of the content. Making another show about a bunch of martial artist kids saving the world will not guarantee an instant success, but making a show with great depth and quality might. Writing about the *Avatar*, Susan Stewart in the New York Times said:

“This is complicated stuff, the reconciliation of religion and violence, and it’s beautifully rendered: simple enough for Nickelodeon fans and subtle enough for their parents, with humor to puncture the pomposity inherent in the heroic genre.”³²

²⁹ Steve Fritz, “Animated Shorts: Ten Questions with *Avatar*’s Michael Dante DiMartino.” *Newsarama*, <http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=133106> (2007), accessed 10 March 2009

³⁰ Eduardo Vasconcellos, “Interview: *Avatar*’s Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino.” *IGN*, <http://tv.ign.com/articles/818/818284p2.html> (2007), accessed 10 March 2009

³¹ *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 years of Essays and Reviews*, 20-21.

³² Susan Stewart, “Television Review: *Avatar* the Last Airbender,” *New York Times*, July 19 2008, B15

In a way, *Avatar*'s success may be partially fulfilling the hopes of anime scholar Fred Patten, when he wrote about the increasing popularity of anime in 1994:

"It would have been ideal if...[these] Japanese animated...[shows] had created an American awareness of the full potential of animation for mature cinematic drama."³³

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