

**The Rise and Dominance of Japanese Pop Culture
In the United States**

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I. Introduction

What exactly makes a culture a culture? It isn't just one mere thing, it is a myriad of traditions and inventions given to the world by one place in particular. It is comprised of religion, food, music, dance, art, infrastructure, language, games, sports, television, the list is virtually endless. That is why one can visit a place in the world and experience multiple cultures because oftentimes tens or even hundreds of them are integrated into a society over the course of time. That brings us to America, the leader in the field of adopting and integrating cultures into its nation. Go to any major city and you will find tens of thousands of different people from countless nations around the world, and with each of them, comes a piece of their native homeland. That is why we are often referred to as the melting pot of the world, and with that brings my attention to something I have been noticing more and more the greater I pay attention to it, and that is the acceptance and spreading of Japanese popular culture in American society. There are countless examples of this, but a few in particular are the rise of Japanese video games/consoles and anime/manga over the last several decades. Walk into any arcade and you will find games like *Pac-man*, *Mario Bros*, *Space Invaders*, *Legend of Zelda* and *Galaga*. Every single one of these games is a timeless classic that almost virtually anyone has heard of. All originally coming from Japan, they still in fact reign supreme today and are known as one of the best games ever created. There is plenty more to it than just those games however, movies like *Godzilla*, *The Grudge* and *Seven Samurai*, have made their way from Japan to Hollywood over the course of several decades. Furthermore, shows such as *Pokemon*, *Yu Gi Oh*, *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto*, *One Piece*, and *Sailor Moon*, have stretched their influence not only in America, but really all over the world. These shows that were created in a foreign country found their way into the limelight of American television. They have been so fully accepted and assimilated into our society that plenty of people consume the creativity and beauty of Japanese popular culture without even realizing it;

it has become fully adopted and assimilated into our society. This begs the question however, when did this peaceful invasion begin?

II. History

Going all the way back to the 1980s, a time where technology was just picking up in the world, people had now been seeing computers and cell phones integrate slowly into the world, and of course video games. On May 21, 1980, the Japanese gaming company NAMCO, had finally created Pac-man and released it to the public. It was an instant hit, it was the new craze, people couldn't get enough of it. Barely six months later, this new wonder of technology found itself on American soil. It didn't take long for that same success to follow suit. "The yellow, pie-shaped Pac-Man character, who travels around a maze trying to eat dots and avoid four hunting ghosts, quickly became an icon of the 1980s. To this day, Pac-Man remains one of the most popular video games in history, and its innovative design has been the focus of numerous books and academic articles". The success was unprecedented, America had never seen something quite like Pac-man before and its popularity is something most companies only dream of. "By 1981, approximately 250 million games of Pac-Man were being played in the U.S. each week on 100,000 Pac-Man machines. Since then, Pac-Man has been released on nearly every video game platform. On May 21, 2010, the Google Doodle even featured a playable version to mark the 30th anniversary of Pac-Man's release" (Jennifer Rosenberg). "In the early 1980s, the nonviolent and goofy nature of Pac-Man made it a phenomenal attraction. In 1982, an estimated 30 million Americans spent \$8 million a week playing Pac-Man, feeding quarters into machines located in arcades or bars. Its popularity among teenagers made it threatening to their parents: Pac-Man was loud and stunningly popular, and the arcades where the machines were located were noisy, congested places" (Jennifer Rosenberg). It was previously stated that most people have at least heard of the game Pacman, however it is even more relevant than just a casual conversation, in fact 94% of Americans recognize the game, a percent higher than recognizing celebrities (Jennifer Rosenberg). It can be said as an objective fact that Pac-man is one

of, if not the most popular video game in the world. It was the trailblazer that set the bar for the many other video games that would soon follow and migrate to the United States.

One of these games is known as *Space Invaders*. Created by Japanese engineer and game designer Nishikado Tomohiro in 1978, this game would quickly find itself to be one of the most popular arcade games in history. “*Space Invaders* is a very simple game by modern standards, but it was a technological marvel in its time. Typical levels consist of a player piloting a laser cannon to battle columns of descending aliens while using shields to block alien fire. The speed of the alien approach increases as the game progresses, adding to the tension. A bonus alien spaceship appears from time to time, which offers the player an opportunity to score additional points by blowing it up” (“*Space Invaders*.”). This basic gaming concept became a marvel of its time, very similar to its rival game *Pac-man*. These games were literally history in the making, before their inception there wasn’t a virtual world where someone can pay 10 cents and pilot a spaceship, shoot, and earn prizes on this sort of scale. This resulted in a videogame epidemic in which its popularity will forever be unprecedented. Britannica writes “*Space Invaders* was a worldwide success and paved the way for a generation of shooting games that became extremely popular. In Japan demand for the arcade game was so great that it led to a coin shortage and prompted an increase in production of the 100-yen coin” (“*Space Invaders*.”). Clearly, it was a sensation all over Japan and it didn’t take the US very long to catch on. Roughly two years after its initial release in Japan, the American gaming manufacturer Atari adapted a version of the game for the Atari 2600 console (Elyse Betters). Similar to *Pac-man*, *Space Invaders* found great success upon its arrival to the states. “*Space Invaders* had a revolutionary impact; it helped lay the foundation for modern video games” (Elyse Betters). Time and time again it is said that no matter how good a second or third is, nothing ever beats the original, and with a game like *Space Invaders* it is proven true once again. BBC writes ‘despite the many updates, it’s the original that is held in the highest esteem... Guinness Worlds Record named it the top rated arcade game because of its technical, creative and cultural impact’” (Elyse Betters). That “impact” was so powerful, that it actually gave what people are calling “birth of a new art

form”. Kate Carmody, a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Modern Art says “*Space Invaders* met the criteria we defined for outstanding interaction design”, as the Museum announced that the game plans to join its permanent collection (Elyse Betters). From an analytical standpoint, it is clear that both *Space Invaders* and *Pac-man* have unprecedented success in the states. However, even they, at the very top of mountain, are not alone.

Rivaling these classics is no easy feat, and can only be done by garnishing just as much, if not more fame. A game that does exactly that is none other than the *Mario* franchise. It has become one of, if not the most well decorated and distinguished franchises in videogame history. Martin Stezano, a journalist for *History.com* writes “He wasn’t much, just a handful of colored pixels on a grainy screen, a figure trying to save his girlfriend from a giant ape named Donkey Kong. By the time the 1990s came around, Mario had not only rescued his lady love from her simian kidnapper, he’d become the face of Nintendo itself” (Martin Stezano). Stezano was absolutely correct in saying this, *Mario* took the video game world by storm, generating revenue never before seen in that field and reaching a bevy of untapped demographics previously missed by its predecessors. With the success and pedigree this game has today, it begs the question, where did its journey begin? It started with the imagination of a man Shigeru Miyamoto, a newly college graduate who got a job at the Nintendo Headquarters located in Japan. He approached this game much different than his peers focusing on the storyline rather than the programs and coding that goes into it. The result was the game previously mentioned, *Donkey Kong*, which history would show to be a complete and utter success. Nintendo continued to push forward and create even more games based on this, “the company did not take their hands off the joystick to celebrate their win. They quickly developed and released a sequel named *Donkey Kong Jr.*, which featured the son of *Donkey Kong* attempting to rescue his father from the evil clutches of the character formerly known as *Jumpman*, but now named *Mario*. Despite being the bad guy (for the first and only time of his career), the game was another huge success for Nintendo” (Martin Stezano). With now two major successes under their belt, Nintendo felt it was time to expand even further and let Mario be in the limelight. The product of this

would be the creation of the arcade game *Mario Bros*. Released in 1983, the game focuses on Mario and his brother Luigi who are depicted as two New York plumbers and their adventures saving their city from creatures and monsters rising from the sewers. This game would follow suit, also being a great success and would lead into one of the biggest advancements in videogame history. Just several months later, on July 15th 1983, Mario could now be played on a console at home in Japan, giving everyone who lived there the opportunity to play right in their very own living room. Sales for Nintendo went up astronomically, and three years later and after running tests at several locations; it was now readily available in the United States (Martin Stezano). Within a couple years, Nintendo would have the American market in the palm of its hand, there simply wasn't a company that could match up to what it had become. They continuously put out similar games such as *Mario Bros 2* and *Mario Bros 3*. These were made to progress the main story and garnish even more popularity and sales. In fact, they were so heavily anticipated and loved that the third edition, *Mario Bros 3*, sold over two million copies making it the best selling game in videogame history. ("The History of Mario." IGN).

Miyamoto wasn't exactly just a one hit wonder; he ended up producing a bevy of games that would result in just as much success and acceptance from the public. He took himself and Nintendo to even further heights when they released the game *The Legend of Zelda*. Although video games were still relatively new, *The Legend of Zelda* created "a new era in the culture, technology, and business of video games (Henry Lowood). This is an undeniable claim when one looks at the games Miyamoto has previously made. Generally speaking, the majority of the games Miyamoto created are objective based games, meaning that there are missions and tasks that the main character must accomplish in order to win the game. For example, In *Mario*, you need to hunt for ghosts with Luigi throughout New York and in *Donkey Kong*, the objective is for Mario to rescue Princess Peach from her capture so they can live happily ever after. What separates *The Legend of Zelda* from the rest of these is that it is an open world type of game meaning that the player in control can go out and create their own path and develop their character whichever way they would like. This type of game mode was also made possible by the recent

creation of the memory card. “Miyamoto’s design exploited the improvements in graphics processing made possible by Nintendo’s MMC (Memory Map Controller) chip, and the provision of battery-powered backup storage in Nintendo’s new game cartridges allowed players to save their progress, thus making extended story lines more practical. The game interface also featured new elements, such as screens that were activated to manage the hero’s items or abilities—a technique similar to the pull-down menus then beginning to appear in business software. These innovations gave players freedom to navigate through a fully two-dimensional world (viewed from the top down) as Link’s personality evolved through his efforts to defeat the evil Ganon and rescue princess Zelda” (Henry Lowood). Watching your own character evolve was a new concept that took gaming to another level. As Link beat each mission, he acquired new weapons, abilities and friends. Starting off as your run of the mill character, he would evolve into a legendary swordsman as the game progressed (Henry Lowood).

Released in Japan in 1986, this new style of gameplay was a blockbuster for Nintendo. They sold millions of copies in its first year alone, and made a record-like appearance in America, being released only a year later in 1987. Nintendo would never live to see a downfall, even today it is still the biggest creator in the video gaming industry. Like *Zelda*, Nintendo has a bevy of other games such as *Mario*, *Donkey Kong*, *etc.* that either branch off into other games with different storylines or have a continuation that furthers current quest. This has resulted in an absolute boom in the video game world, especially in America. Children grow up playing these games so long that they pass it down to their children and so on. It isn’t a shock to see *Mario*, *Zelda* and *Donkey Kong* become household names in gaming families. William Tsutsui, a scholar in the history of Japanese culture writes extensively on this cultural boom. He writes “Japan’s rising stature as a supplier of youth entertainment products was enhanced in the late 1970s with the start of the worldwide video game craze. Japanese innovations came to drive the industry’s growth. Japanese machines came to dominate the arcades that sprouted in American malls and campus student centers, with games like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* as well as *Mario Bros.* enjoying huge popularity. Nintendo, whose corporate roots were in manufacturing playing

cards, would become the global leader in both the hardware and software of video gaming. By the end of the 1980s, families around the world were likely to have a Japanese-made television attached to a Japanese-made VCR and game console running Japanese-made games” (William Tsutsui 15, 16).

Japanese popular culture is more than just video games, it is also home to two of the most influential entertainment outlets in history, anime and manga. Their names describe what they are perfectly well “anime” meaning animated film and “manga” which translates to “whimsical or impromptu pictures” (Edward Diep). There is a very deep and rich history for both anime and manga alike, ranging from decades to centuries in years of existence. According to Diep, there is evidence that manga can be traced all the way back to the 12th century. During the Edo Period, which has a broad range from 1603 to 1867, books of drawings have been found that embedded the concept of manga, however, the word manga had yet to even be invented by this point in time (A Short History of Manga). Diep focuses on the word “manga” in particular, stating that it was created in 1798 by a man with the name Santo Kyoden. In 1814 Santo and his friend Katsushika Hokusai, who served as the artist, were the first to use the word “manga” as the title for his sketchbooks titled “Hokusai Manga” (Edward Diep). With this sketchbook, a new form of art and entertainment was born. Like any new form of entertainment, popularity grows exponentially. This is the exact case for manga, over the course of numerous decades, manga became so popular and influential that even the government took notice and used it as an opportunity to expand. “During the rise of Japanese Imperialism, the Japanese empire used manga for spreading propaganda about the benefits of Japanese leadership” (Edward Diep). However, after the second World War, this tactic was quickly ended as the Japanese were now under occupation by the Allied Powers. This occupation had a rather peculiar impact on manga in Japan. Since manga was no longer regulated for propaganda, Japanese artists and sketchers could branch out and draw anything in their power. This led to the creation of arguably the most notable manga of all time, *Astro Boy*. Released in 1952 by Tezuka Osamu, otherwise known as the “God of Manga” and “Japanese equivalent to Walt Disney”, *Astro Boy* was the first of its kind and truly set the path for more modern manga to blossom (Edward Diep). This

trend of developing more in depth manga continued well after the Allied Powers left, “In the post-occupational years, particularly between 1950 and 1969, an increasingly large readership for manga was established, leading to the division into two main marketing genres - shōnen, aimed at boys, and shōjo, dedicated to girls. In shōnen, one can find comics that were subdivided according to age: boys up to 18 years old, young men 18 to 30 years old, known as seinen, and adult, grown men, referred to as seijin manga. Charged with action, adventure, fighting of all kinds, as well as sports, technology, romance and sometimes sexuality, these involved one or more male protagonists and helped create the concept of heroes. Shōjo, the “female” comics, were essentially the same way, while their topics and core audience were, of course, female. Thus, we have sub-categories like redisu, redikomi and josei, and themes like romance, superheroines, relationships from a female point of view, historical drama and others. (A Short History of Manga). There are other popular genres as well, the article furthers this by stating “we have Yōji, for children aged 1-4, followed by Kodomo (or Jidō), for kids just learning to read, Shōnen-ai (Yaoi), featuring romantic relationship between two male characters and Shōjo-ai (Yuri), describing the love of two female characters. Of course, one of the most prominent types is hentai, with hardcore sexual content. Taking its name from the Japanese words “hentai seiyoku”, meaning “a perverse sexual desire”, these manga depict exactly that, bizarre acts. Although it was not originally a genre of manga, the term was adopted by the English-speaking, which now use it to describe a genre of anime and manga pornography. Some also consider it to be a part of the Japanese erotic art (A Short History of Manga). With so many genres, it is reasonable to see why manga is so popular there is a comic for anyone and everyone.

Although it can be said there is a wide variety of manga out there, the most popular and successful ones almost always are under the shonen genre. A prime example of this would be the manga Dragon Ball. “Launched in 1984 in the pages of Sheuisha’s Weekly Shonen Jump, Akira Toriyama’s original Dragon Ball was a very different beast to the one western viewers would eventually meet” (Matt Kamen). “Boisterous Son Goku, an adventurous and unusually strong boy with no social graces

whatsoever. Raised in seclusion by his adoptive grandfather, he doesn't even know what girls are – making for some prime gag moments when he meets treasure hunter Bulma. Soon teaming up, the pair track down seven rare 'Dragon Balls' – powerful items that can summon the wish-granting dragon Shenron. These early stories were very loosely based on Chinese fables but Toriyama gave them a fresh twist, his distinctive art style and perfect balance of comedy and action making the series a hit” (Matt Kamen). What a hit it would be, *Dragon Ball* quickly rose through the ranks and became one of the most popular manga of its time. Even today there are countless spinoffs rehashing the old plotlines as well as a bevy of continuations by Toriyama.

In manga culture, there is a nickname given to the three most famous pieces that have been created thus far, they are known as the big three. Dragon Ball being one of them, another is the manga known as *Naruto*. Written by a man named Masashi Kishimoto, this manga would catch the hearts of millions worldwide and become subjectively, the best manga of all time. Kishimoto was born in 1974 in rural Okayama Prefecture, Japan, and like many of his peers he wanted to become a famous manga artist, even getting some of his motivation from the manga *Dragon Ball*. After his time in art college, he was recognized for several projects that had mild success but he then decided on a story that was based around traditional Japanese culture (VIZ Staff). This story would be none other than *Naruto*, which was originally drawn in 1997 and told a one-shot story about fox spirits. However his final version got its debut just two years later in 1999 when it was featured in the *Weekly Shonen Jump*, and the results were an artist's dream come true. This manga would become one of the most popular in history, countless movies, spinoffs, novels, and a two part anime series would soon follow. This shonen series struck the hearts of countless people. It felt so raw and real, as if these animated experiences had been about an earthly person's life. The story is about a young parentless boy named *Naruto Uzumaki*, and his quest to become Hokage, or the leader of the village. The journey from start to finish took roughly 15 years, when it was first published to when Kishimoto wrote the very last chapter in 2014. It totaled 720 chapters and had an unshakable fan base in both Japan as well as America.

Finally, the third manga of the big three, a series that is still currently ongoing with over a thousand chapters total, *One Piece*. Written by Eiichiro Oda, this manga takes gold in being the longest running series in history. Oda started his career at the young age of 17 when his one-shot cowboy manga *Wanted!* won second place in the esteemed Tezuka manga awards (VIZ Staff One Piece). Roughly seven years later however Oda released the very first chapter of his new manga *One Piece*, and it wouldn't take long for the entire nation to be swept off its feet. It quickly rose to fame and became one of the most popular manga in the country. The plot gave most shonen readers a glimpse of the life they always wanted. It follows the life of a self proclaimed pirate by the name of *Luffy*, and his goal of becoming the king of the pirates. Throughout the story, Luffy is always meeting new people, developing friendships, forging bonds, etc. He also battles tough enemies, finds himself in sticky situations and fails more time than one. He works endlessly to meet his goal however, he is determined to get there one day no matter how hard it may be. This attitude and these experiences are what draw shonen readers to this type of manga. It is everything they want to experience, and in essence, they experience it through Luffy.

It is clear that manga has a huge outreach and has attracted millions of readers worldwide. However, with manga leading the way, anime is almost always there to follow. They are essentially parallel to each other. Generally speaking, a successful manga will have what is called an anime adaptation meaning that the manga will be animated and shown on television. This concept of anime has taken the world by storm. It is arguably Japan's biggest "export" if one would like to call it that. It is consumed in unprecedented amounts and has only gotten more popular as time goes on. It has a long and very rich history, recently passing over 100 years since its inception. Japan's first official anime was shown in 1917. It was created by Shimokawa Oten, made with chalk, and less than five minutes long. However there is speculation that anime could have been released even earlier than that, the reason it is not confirmed is because in the very beginning, anime films were often dismantled and discarded after the reels were finished (Right Stuf). Regardless, 1917 marked the official release and this new industry began to ever so slowly grow as the years went on. Unfortunately, this slow growth would soon be halted,

Yamaguchi, who has written extensively on the history of anime says “One of the things that helped them find their niche was anime production for public relations and publicity campaigns by public institutions. Domestic anime production was beginning to develop a small but solid foundation when Tokyo and the surrounding area suffered catastrophic damage in the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923. The anime industry was forced to start over from scratch” (Yasuo Yamaguchi). He goes on to say that the anime industry still continued to struggle well after the earthquake “unable to respond adequately to successive innovations, including the appearance of the first talkies in 1929 and color film in 1932. During this period, Ōfuji Noburō won international acclaim for *Bagudajō no tōzoku* (The Thief of Baguda Castle), which he made by cutting and pasting *chiyogami* (Japanese colored paper). His film is remembered as the first to make its presence felt outside Japan. Many other promising anime artists appeared one after another, but with war approaching, goods were in extremely short supply as the national mood turned militaristic. Even film was not easy to get hold of. It was in this context that the first full-length theatrical film in the history of Japanese anime was released. *Momotarō: Umi no shinpei* (Momotarō’s Divine Sea Warriors, B&W, 74 minutes), produced by the navy, came out just before the end of the war. This was a propagandistic film designed to lift morale and commitment to the war effort” (Yasuo Yamaguchi). This attitude of developing anime propaganda would remain firm throughout war and didn’t lead to any newfound growth in the industry. However, by the end of the war, something big was beginning to happen. Okawa Hiroshi, the president of the Toei film company, had seen the American film *Snow White*, and fell in love. “He was overwhelmed by the gorgeous color of the film. In 1956, he built a modern studio—a white-walled palace with air conditioning, as people called it—and founded Tōei Dōga (now Tōei Animation). His ambition: to become “the Disney of the East.” (Yasuo Yamaguchi). Over the next several years, they were on course to do just that. They had been releasing titles with very good success and viewership in anime was booming, doing numbers that had not been previously seen before. Success would grow even more plentiful for the industry. Just seven years later, on January 1st, 1963, the very first Japanese television anime would be broadcasted (Yasuo Yamaguchi). The anime would be the world

famous *Astro Boy*. It was the first manga to be adapted into an anime and marked a new era in the industry.

III. Beginning to Rise

For the next fifteen to twenty years, all of these creations would lay dormant from America and the rest of the world, but as the 1980s rolled in, America started to get a glimpse of what Japanese popular culture had to offer. At first, Americans had games like *Pac-man*, *Space Invaders*, *Donkey Kong*, etc. All of which had massive success and are still played to this very day. Each game has countless spinoffs, continuations and side stories. Shortly after, manga and anime began to follow and it spread like wildfire in America throughout the late 80s and early 90s. Debbi Gardiner, a writer with an extensive background in this phenomena discusses it in great detail in one of her articles. She writes, “anime is the fastest growing segment in the video and DVD rental market, according to AD Vision, the largest distributor of anime in the US. AD Vision was the first anime company in the States in 1992, now there are twenty like it” (Debbi Gardiner 16). She continues by discussing how the anime toy market is also a booming enterprise in America as well. Mentioning how certain cities such as San Francisco for example, have the anime toy stores in the central shopping hub. Even after a decade, Bandai America’s “Power Rangers Wild Force” toy line is still a bestseller. She also notes that according to Jerry Chu, a marketing manager for Bandai, claims that sales growth of the toys goes up an average 120 to 130 percent year on year (Debbi Gardiner 16). This statistic alone shows the rise and dominance of anime in just the early 1990’s alone. The success was “gradual” according to Gardiner, the first turning point had been roughly throughout the mid 1980’s with the help of the internet, which was a very new entity at the time. Through the web, fans would chat with one another and create what was called tape-swapping, this is the practice of gathering clean, mint condition anime tapes, and swapping them for another set. In other words, people

would constantly be swapping anime, taking in a new series, watching it, then swapping for another reason and so on and so forth. This was the main way anime circulated throughout America until the next big breakthrough in the early 1990s. It was the year 1992 to be exact, that US Renditions, a film importer, released the first english subtitled anime videotape. Before the release of the tape, the only way to buy anime was to buy it from Japan for the rental market price. A common practice was also driving to the select stores that had anime where they would then rent them so they could tape it and duplicate it for themselves, then return the borrowed copy (Debbi Gardiner 17). The steady growth of popularity continued, just a year later in 1993, Fox Channel Network aired a remake of the *Power Rangers* and it was a great success. This prompted the airing of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a spin off of the original. The result was an “instant hit” as Gardiner calls it and created an “anime frenzy” (Debbi Gardiner 17). This frenzy only got bigger when in 1995 the anime *Sailor Moon* made its debut on American television.

This anime had a rather peculiar run of form throughout its airing. In the very beginning, the ratings did not display a huge success by any means. It was a slow and steady build but eventually, after dozens of airings, it eventually got a “cult like” following. This anime broke new ground as well, it was mainly geared towards teen and young adult women so now, a new demographic was tapped into which meant more viewers, and more spreading of anime to the American public (Debbi Gardiner 17). *Sailor Moon* to this day still remains as one of the most popular and well known anime. It is a classic and it is one of those types of shows that someone new to anime starts off with. This show alone is responsible for millions of people getting into anime and it is one of the most famous works that America has seen.

The widespread success anime, manga and video games had been receiving were not solely due to the few titles listed so far. Arguably, the biggest success would arrive six to seven years later from 1998 to 1999. It was none other than the *Pokemon* franchise. As Gardiner describes it, they had developed a new and improved business model. Firstly, they would release a toy, then a video game, trading cards, and finally a TV show, “children of all ages were targeted. It was *Pokemon* that prompted American

companies to go to Japan to get co-production deals or acquire rights. *Pokemon* was also key because it was the first TV show where producers did not disguise the fact that anime was Japanese. Before *Pokemon*, Americans were often watching anime cartoons without realizing they were from Japan. The quality of the dubbing was that good. After *Pokemon*, it became okay that anime was Japanese” (Debbi Gardiner 18). The *Pokemon* franchise was and is still one of the most successful franchises in the entertainment industry. It set the precedent for what other companies want to create and what the consumer wants to have. Throughout its career, *Pokemon* has aired 1,127 episodes on TV, as well as 20 movies. Furthermore, it has over 9,000 cards in its deck as well as 122 official games (*Pokemon Database*). These stats clearly show just how popular this foreign enterprise is here in America. It has been accepted and welcomed with open arms and served as the benchmark for future franchises.

This time period of the late 1990s and early 2000s continued to display massive growth and it was not solely due to the *Pokemon* franchise. In March of 1997, a programming block by the name of *Toonami*, was aired for the first time on *Cartoon Network*. This block was far different than anything previously shown before on television. It consisted of mostly English dubbed anime and was trying to tap into a new market of viewers. It marked a new beginning where viewers no longer needed to engage in “tape-swapping” they could now turn on their TV and watch anime at their leisure (Elijah Watson). However, *Toonami* served more than just anime, “the programming block didn’t stop there, curating everything from rising artists and bands to popular video games and extreme sports. *Toonami* was exporting cool and treating their demographic as such, speaking to pre-teens and teens in a way that wasn’t patronizing but genuine” (Elijah Watson). However, *Toonami*’s real success would come just a short while after its inception when they aired the trifecta of anime which consisted of the aforementioned *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball*, and *Gundam Wing*. *Toonami* was actually quite lucky to get the rights to a show like *Gundam*. In the article written by Watson, he interviews one of the co-founders of the programming block James Demarco who basically describes the process as getting a phone call from Bandai, one of the leading anime creators in Japan, asking if they would like to air the show. It was a

match made in heaven, Defranco and his crew couldn't be more willing to participate and made a deal accordingly. With the trifacta now airing, viewers trickled in by the hundreds of thousands. Defranco talks about how they would read articles about their work in newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* and other major publications. He says "It was really weird to suddenly have the *Wall Street Journal* writing about *Dragon Ball Z*. And 90 percent of the people who wrote about it got it completely wrong, whether it was positive or negative. That was what clued us in that we were having a larger impact. And the ratings exploded so we knew that a lot of people were watching, but we didn't understand that it was making a cultural impact until we would occasionally speak at a high school and half of the kids in the room were like, "Oh man, I love Toonami." (Elijah Watson). There was not any sort of slow down for the next several years, the network continued to be a great curator for English dubbed anime and opened the door for millions into a world they have never seen with a brand new culture to consume. However after these few years, *Toonami* had to switch time slots from the week to weekend which over time left a huge blow on their viewership. The main cause of this switch was because they often showed certain anime that had overly violent scenes for the younger viewer and it needed to be moved to a less active time. Eventually, the loss in viewership was too much to handle and in 2007, the block was eventually cancelled. Regardless of cancellation, *Toonami* laid the groundwork and gave a pathway to new viewerships and easier access to Japanese pop culture.

At the same time *Toonami* was blossoming, the world famous franchise *Yu Gi Oh* also saw similar growth. Created by Kazuki Takahashi the story focused on "spiky-haired Yugi, a weak and unassuming teenager, solves the mysterious Millennium Puzzle, he is granted special powers that are activated when he plays games. Transformed into his alter-ego, Yu-Gi-Oh ("King of Games"), he finds himself engaged in Shadow Games, which change into combat against evil superhuman opponents. The most significant of these is Duel Monsters, a character-card game modeled (within the story line) after an ancient Egyptian invention." (Encyclopedia Britannica). Originally airing in the Shonen Jump comics in 1996, it took a few years before the franchise would arrive at America's doorstep. Roughly five years

later, in 2001, it finally premiered and followed suit similar to Pokemon, “The card game and television episodes debuted in the United States in 2001. The ordinary Yugi, who was empowered by game play to be a greater version of himself, was an appealing hero to young fans. Although a successful series of video games was launched, Yu-Gi-Oh! was most successful as a card game that focused on face-to-face card play and social interaction” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

IV. Becoming Mainstream

Yu Gi Oh had a very successful run worldwide, but mostly in the United States. “It was a foundational anime series for many, airing stateside in the early 2000s. With its combination of mystical ancient Egyptian lore, fast-paced game play, and the aggressive merchandising of a real-life trading card game, it was all the rage for a solid few years — and for some, it still holds a very special place in their hearts even years later. Whether you're a fan of the card game itself or you're in it for the story of restoring an ancient pharaoh's long-lost memories, there are plenty of little details from Yu-Gi-Oh! that casual fans could have easily missed” (Morgana Santilli). This statement rings true for a huge percent of young men in America. Generally speaking, this show was one of the most popular on television for young boys, it caught their eyes by having a great adventure type plot that most young boys want to have. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the playing cards helped draw in even more fans to watch the show. Drove of people would flock to stores to collect their newest cards and then tune in to see them live in action. Like many before its time, the original series that ended decades ago would live on through countless adaptations and spinoffs. Santilli covers the experience of the series doing exactly this by writing “even though the initial viewers grew up and moved on to other franchises, the success of the series and its real-world trading card game inspired a slew of spinoffs. Each new iteration keeps the central theme of dueling with cards, but adds its own spin or unique monster types to keep the action fresh and the audience involved” (Morgana Santilli). A good litmus test to see how revered a series is, is to see how well the adaptations do. Many adaptations fail and tarnish the name of the original series. Some are average and stop after one season, it all depends on how well perceived they are by the fan base.

Knowing this, it is no surprise that the series has had a bevy of successful spinoffs. Just in 2017, they had a 70 episode spinoff that had quite the success with solid ratings from numerous websites (Morgana Santilli). In her article she also discussed the future of another spinoff that was set to air in 2020. Since then, the spinoff titled *Yu Gi Oh! Sevens debuted* in April and racked up a total of 27 episodes in its first season (Morgana Santilli). All this data cements the fact that this anime has been so loved by America since its arrival here 19 years ago and sure enough, with these spinoffs still airing, it will continue to receive that very same love for years to come.

How else could one watch these types of shows? What if there was a series or movie that wasn't available on *Toonami* for example? That is where the website and streaming service, *Crunchyroll* comes into play. In an interview with ICv2, an online trade magazine, Kun Gao, the CEO of the company, details the journey of Crunchyroll with him and his friends. "Crunchyroll started in the middle of 2006. Three other founders and I were friends. We met at UC Berkeley. We're all electronic engineering and computer science majors. Back then anime was really picking up everywhere--in the dorms, on campus, people were watching it. We got really into animation. After we left college in 2004 we all went our separate ways, some of us going to grad school, others working in industry, mostly on consumer facing Websites. Eventually we all met back again and we decided to work on anime as a nights and weekends passion project. We still had work during the day and we were sinking quite a bit of our own money in and maxing out credit cards because the bandwidth bill was so high. It eventually got to a point around the middle of 2007 when all we could do was keep the site up. There were so many things to do. We voluntarily quit our jobs. It was really a very scary moment because we didn't know how things were going to turn out, but we had a lot of faith that because we were servicing a lot of passionate fans and were building a site that fans can enjoy, it would turn out for the best" (ICv2 Staff). Gao and his colleagues had created the perfect website for the anime fan it would seem. As he points out, there were indeed other sites attempting to do the same type of service but even with the slow start, *Crunchyroll* was clearly different from the others. Eventually, it turned into an even bigger operation with the help of

some investments. The CEO says “After that we started talking to venture capitalists. They became very interested because there were so many passionate fans on the site--they were not just into watching content, but also community and the full social networking experience. We received funding from Venrock (that’s the venture arm of the Rockefeller family), in December of 2007. From then on we’ve been very aggressively licensing content, and taking down unlicensed content. We’ve set up an office in Japan. We actually have a subsidiary now in Japan talking to all the license holders and licensing all the content that we can get our hands on. That’s pretty much where we are now” (ICv2 Staff). For the 2007 anime fan, this site was nothing but a dream come true. In the original layout, there wasn’t even a subscription fee, but rather ad revenue supported streaming. This meant that the consumer did not need to pay for a subscription but the anime creator and streaming service still received revenue through advertisements. However, as time went on, *Crunchyroll* did in fact develop a subscription system in order to watch licensed shows such as *Naruto*, *Gintama* and *Skip Beat* (ICv2 Staff).

The growth of this streaming platform, even with now having to pay a subscription for licensed anime, correlates exactly with the popularity of anime over time. Fast forward just eight years later in 2015, the site now had over 750,000 active subscribers (Sahil Patel). What does one get with a subscription? In an article with Digiday, Kun Gao provides the answers - “On the subscription side, the service has two tiers priced at \$7 and \$12 per month. For \$7, users get access to the latest episodes of Japanese shows within minutes of their broadcast in Japan as well as access to the service’s entire video library and manga (Japanese comics) collection — all ad-free. The \$12 “premium-plus” package offers even more perks. Subscribers get discounts on merchandise in the Crunchyroll store and VIP access during meet-and-greets with Japanese creators at fan conventions around the world” (Sahil Patel). With perks like these, it is no wonder that there are such an abundance of subscribers. However, one does not need to subscribe to enjoy all the anime the website has to offer. In fact, as long as they are willing to sit through advertisements, they can watch free of charge (Sahil Patel). However, there is even more value to *Crunchyroll* besides just the anime. Tom Pickett, one of the other CEO’s explains this exactly by

saying “What also helps is that it would be almost impossible to build something like Crunchyroll on linear TV. A traditional TV channel can’t offer social forums that allow viewers to message each other about their favorite shows, a store where they can buy merchandise about their favorite shows, or even give viewers the chance to pay more for more perks. “We are offering more value than TV,” (Sahil Patel). Essentially, the anime industry grew from the concept of tape-swapping with hundreds of people across certain states, to now having its own community with three quarters of a million members involved, the widespread growth is simply undeniable.

This concept of forums was valuable for many different reasons. Firstly, it gave the chance for fellow anime watchers to talk about recent episodes, future releases, etc. It was also huge for planning for the new concept of festivals and conventions. Over time as anime progressed in popularity, these types of events began popping up little by little and now in present day 2020, they are hosted in every major city across America annually. “Fans and fan organizations have been important to the introduction and popularization of Japanese forms, especially anime and manga in the United States. Anime conventions, which are now common events in most large American cities and college towns, are significant forums for disseminating Japanese pop, while anime and manga clubs foster networks of fans in schools and universities” (William Tsutsui 45). At these conventions, people can be themselves and are free to dress however they please, this results in a new age practice of cosplaying. This is the act of dressing up and performing as characters from anime and manga (William Tsutsui 45). The conventions differ in their significance however. For example, last year in Los Angeles, the third annual *Animation is Film Festival* took place debuting the last blockbuster anime film “*Weathering With You*” (Roland Kelts). Although it isn’t a full scale convention or expo, this event did not fly under the radar, in fact, tickets sold out in roughly three minutes after going live (Roland Kelts).

It goes without saying, that looking at the statistics, books, and articles, that anime and manga have absolutely been accepted and ultimately flourished here in the United States. With this being true, there are numerous reasons why. Firstly, Tsutsui claims that it can be dated back decades before anime

and manga were even the mainstream form of entertainment. He writes “some scholars of Japanese popular culture’s global spread have stressed that a long postwar heritage of cultural interactions between the United States and Japan have set the stage for the more recent rise of Japanese pop forms in America” (William Tsutsui 38). Continuing, he mentions how early films such as *Godzilla*, paved the way for future films, “starting with the release of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* in US theatres in 1956, a steady stream

V. Founding out Why

of entertainment products imported from Japan conditioned American audiences to the look and feel of Japanese popular culture” (William Tsutsui 38).

In later chapters, Tsutsui touches on other reasons why Japanese pop culture is so well accepted amongst Americans. He touches on how there were numerous academic studies done where researchers directly asked consumers why they are so attracted to the culture. He discusses the success of *Pokemon* and points out that “research on the young consumers of *Pokemon*, for example, confirms the success of Nintendo’s intense marketing campaign, which fired a generation of American children with the passion to “catch ‘em all” by buying and dealing collectible trading cards” (William Tsutsui 44). Further research this time for the movie series *Godzilla* showed different reasons than previously mentioned.. “A large survey of *Godzilla* fans found that most loved the color and actions of Japanese creature features, the exuberant (but stylized) violence of monsters wrestling and Tokyo being stomped, and the movies’ uncomplicated good-versus-evil story lines. For middle-aged admirers of the king of the monsters, *Godzilla* films were perhaps the most compelling as a form of nostalgia, a vehicle for recalling the memories of childhood and a simpler, gentler time” (William Tsutsui 45).

Frankly, there are millions of reasons as to why the American people are so receptive and accepting of Japanese pop culture. They vary from person to person and more often than not, people get involved for different reasons. This is the exact case with me personally. There are so many reasons why I was drawn into anime, manga, etc. Going back roughly 15 years ago, I was already a consumer without

even realizing it. Here I was, playing the newest *Pokemon*, on my Gameboy Advance made none other by Sony. Remembering those days brings back such a beautiful feeling. Grinding every day to level up my Pokemon, exploring every inch of the world I was playing in, battling gyms trying to earn rewards and badges. Then, came the creation of being able to battle your friends online. This forever changed the Pokemon world. Originally, it was just you versus the computer, but now, one could battle their own

VI. Personal Experience

friends. This made everyone, myself included, that much more competitive and really adopt the “gotta catch ‘em all” attitude of Pokemon. This attitude spilled over and made myself and even my peers welcome in other games and shows without even realizing their origins. My generation was one raised on everything Toonami had to offer, and many of us took great advantage of that. For me however, although I played the games, and of course I watched Yu Gi Oh! and Pokemon, my real introduction to anime didn’t begin until I was about 18 years old. My friend kept mentioning this show to me, saying how it wasn’t like anything he had ever really seen before. Great plot, amazing characters, entertaining fights, etc., I ask what the same of it was to which he replied “One Punch Man”. Being someone who has yet to ever watch anime, I had never heard of it. So, I watch the trailer and give it a shot. Before this little interaction, I honestly didn’t even know what anime really was. I had the stereotype idea that it was school girls with huge eyes and high pitched voices. After learning what it really is, I could not have been more wrong. I binged that entire show in less than a day, and instantly I was hooked. I went running back to my friend, begging for recommendations, asking if he’d seen this anime or that anime, what his favorites are. That’s when I found the *Naruto* anime. The entire show is exactly 720 episodes spaced out over 15 some odd years, following the young boy from being a child, to becoming a young man. This show was something I truly never had experienced before. Immediately, I was a die hard fan, spending my time researching the characters, ordering merchandise, and talking about it with my friends. I simply could not get enough of this show. At first, I thought I would enjoy this show like any other, just take it at face value and watch to relax and unwind. However, when one watches *Naruto*, you cannot help but get

an inner sense of wanting to better yourself physically and mentally. There are too many scenes to name where Naruto himself, or one of his friends just embraces the fact that they aren't strong enough, and in order to reach their goals, they need to put in the work everyday to reach their goals. This spoke volumes with me, at the time I was fairly overweight and unhappy with myself as a whole. I kept complaining and wallowing in depression, wondering why I'm not where I want to be in life. The more I continued to watch this kid just constantly work and want better, the more I started to think and do the same. There were so many I didn't want to exercise, eat healthy, meditate, and then I would simply say to myself, "what would Naruto do?" I knew the answer was to get up, and do whatever was necessary to reach my goal, and so that is what I did. Every time I slipped up, just as he has, I brush it off, accept it, and move ahead just like he does. There are numerous scenes which portray real life themes that people face everyday and watching them through the show helps you battle and ultimately overcome them. One of my favorite quotes happens to be from the show, where one of the sensei's, Might Gai, says "there is no point in making the effort if you don't believe in yourself". I remember the first time I had heard that, I was watching with tears in my eyes, praying that Naruto and his friends would pass an exam and become ninjas. This quote has followed me everywhere as a result. Whenever I want to reach a goal, something that I know will take a bevy of hard work, I say that quote everyday until it is met. Something as simple as losing weight and getting in shape, I repeat it every single day until I have met my goal, it makes me want to be a better person. After concluding the show, I was left with a permanent feeling to be the best version of myself. I found myself to be more optimistic, hard working, and appreciative of things. Naruto is a role model, someone I look up to and want to be like. Real or not, this series has left a permanent mark on me and later on in life, I very much look forward to showing my kids this show, talk about the real world themes and how it helped me grow as a person. Personally, I believe all shonen anime can be used to help inspire anyone who is willing to accept it and realize it is more than just an anime.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of Japanese pop culture is a very long, but rich one. Dating back generations, it has now blossomed into one of the biggest entertainment platforms in the world through anime, manga and video games. Originally being debuted right after the second World War, it is now part of our American society. One can only have respect and appreciation for these art forms, they have brought so much joy, memories, and help to millions of people across the country, but really all over the world. Only something that is so well liked could have been so successful abroad, the very fact that it is now one of the most popular artforms is a testament to how universally enjoyed it is here. Speaking for myself, I was originally a skeptic, I didn't see the value or the appeal to any of it really. However, after truly giving it a chance and understanding it, I enjoy it more than any other means of entertainment. With this, there is both anecdotal, as well as universal proof that this is the case nation wide. Turn off regular TV, give the usual reruns of *Full House* and *General Hospital* a rest, instead opt for the new mainstream, it is indeed here to stay.

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