

Dead Chat is Ded*

The Rise and Dissolution of Chat Communities Attached to Bootleg Anime Streaming Sites

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O capacious room,
Give me your tongues.

I'm done with being self-
Possessed. Take hold, turn

The river in me. I'm freed
Up to be anybody else . . .

—From *Go-go Ode* by Taylor Johnson

Having regularly heard *Legend of Galactic Heroes* (1988–97) name-dropped between tipsy cultural studies writers since the late 1990s, I had an interest in seeing what spawned such clandestine obsession. But as my sole reason for watching it was from social curiosity, I never set myself the nigh-impossible task of finding all twenty-five-plus tapes of fansubs. Most anime fans of past generations had one of these white (sharpie-labeled) whales; elusive shows they relentlessly pursued with hopes of sharing with their friends in a late-night binge in their living rooms, *Macross* figurines inevitably adorning the entertainment center, like mecha Greek theater masks. By early 2015, the streaming revolution was growing, and almost everything was available somewhere. So, one night, on a whim, I simply muddled some words into Google: “*Legend of Galactic Heroes* Streaming Subtitled Full.” No legal link showed up on the first page of search results, so I figured the show still was not licensed. I clicked the first link and, indeed, a site called [Dubbedepisodes.com](http://dubbedepisodes.com) had a reliable stream.¹

There were no friends next to me at my computer desk at 1 a.m., no litany of fansubbers to wrangle, but as I committed myself to its 110 footnote-and-adjective-inducing episodes of epic

¹ “Main Page,” Dubbed Episodes, last modified May 21, 2021, <http://dubbedepisodes.com>.

anime political space opera, dubbedepisodes.com appended a virtual living room of people watching gray-market anime: a built-in Chatango (a messenger application that allows you to find and talk to new people with similar interests) chat room in the right sidebar.² Anime Place was its name, and everyone who was watching anime on dubbedepisodes.com was automatically logged into the chat, reaching toward three thousand simultaneous users on a binge-y night. Other than when the video was in full-screen mode, this public chat would scroll on, appending the “I just googled an anime I wanted to see and clicked the first result” viewer, whether they wanted it or not, into the memes, arguments, abuse, evolving slang, in-jokes, political extremism, moderator intervention, trolling, IRL meetup plans, and lingering Web 1.0 anti-design, fermenting into boisterous (sometimes belligerently hostile) periphery community.

In this brief introductory essay to the accompanying visual essay, I want to provide a basic foundation for both the artworks and also for future researchers interested in the brief gray-market period of anime streaming platforms, and their attendant communities. This includes both the abstract data, as well as a lightly anthropological account of my personal narrative and emotional reactions as a casual user of Anime Place. To properly reconstruct the basic economic and market narrative of anime streaming platforms, it is valuable to use contemporary entertainment publications and industry reports, a method suggested by Mikhail Kulikov to produce a stronger contextuality in the study of media texts and their distribution platforms.³

Ruminating on the work of Stuart Hall, artist and scholar Todd Gray writes: “I realized that normativity is how we are controlled. . . .What is the expectation [for how a citizen or artist acts] and where does this expectation come from? Where do I get these ideas?”⁴ My cursory Google search for *Legend of Galactic Heroes* turned up dozens, maybe hundreds of these sorts of bootleg streaming sites—and adjacent communities—that were crucibles for producing American fandom’s normativity in the decade or so following Crunchyroll’s launch in 2006.⁵

² “Main Page,” Dubbed Episodes, last modified May 21, 2021, <http://dubbedepisodes.com>.

³ Mikhail Kulikov, “Researching the Business of Anime—Crunchyroll,” *Anime and Manga Studies*, last updated Feb 14, 2017, <https://www.animemangastudies.com/2017/02/14/researching-the-business-of-anime-crunchyroll/>.

⁴ Todd Gray, *Euclidian Gris Gris*, ed. Rebecca McGrew (Claremont, Calif.: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2019).

⁵ D. M. Moore, “Anime Is One of the Biggest Fronts in Streaming Wars,” *The Verge*, last updated December 23, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/23/21003549/anime-streaming-wars-netflix-amazon-att-sony-crunchyroll-fu>

The story of Dubbedepisodes.com and Anime Place, a community so intimately grafted into a bootleg streaming site, becomes an example to tease out the vernacular of self-determining, abusive, and just plain weird norms that evolved during the interim period between atomized fansub media (VHS/downloaded files) and the omnipresence of legal anime streaming. A decade's worth of norms from what John Kelsey calls the "anti-community of networked souls" were then dispersed into the rest of the fandom when the gray-market community collapsed, modifying whatever future comes next for the tapestry of American fandom.⁶

The timeframe of the prominence of bootleg anime streaming sites and communities is nebulous and fleeting, but "[a]s Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write, the 'most powerful *symbolic* repertoires' of bourgeois societies are situated at the 'borders, margins, and edges, rather than at the accepted centers.'" ⁷ This period starts roughly in 2006 with Crunchyroll, which was launched as a site that hosted a panoply of anime—including bootleg and fansub content—and ending around 2016 as the current crop of dominant services was launched. Even by the early part of the 2010s, Crunchyroll had already gone legal to much success.⁸ As D. M. Moore's extensive rundown of the rise of legal anime streaming notes, "Crunchyroll's biggest selling points were that it had shows up on the service faster than pirated versions, professionally translated, and it was supporting the original creators."⁹ Moore's work also enumerates 2014 as the year Funimation started spinning up its "simuldub" service (eventually becoming FunimationNow). In 2014, Netflix started investing in original anime content.¹⁰ Amazon briefly tried a standalone service in 2017, the same year as HiDive launched.¹¹ 2017 also saw the industry-changing Netflix announcement that they were going "to spend \$8 billion in 2018 to help make its library 50 percent original," notably including on thirty anime series.¹² By late

nimation.

⁶ John Kelsey, "Next-Level Spleen," in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture), Ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), 333.

⁷ Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," *American Literary History* 9 no. 3 (Fall 1997): 545.

⁸ Maxwell Williams, "How Netflix and Other Streaming Services Are Doubling Down on Anime," *Variety*, last updated July 29, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/anime-streaming-netflix-1203278207/>.

⁹ Moore, "Anime Is One of the Biggest Fronts in Streaming Wars."

¹⁰ Williams, "How Netflix and Other Streaming Services Are Doubling Down on Anime."

¹¹ Moore, "Anime Is One of the Biggest Fronts in Streaming Wars."

¹² Nick Statt, "Netflix Plans to Spend \$8 billion in 2018 to Help Make Its Library 50 Percent Original," *The Verge*,

2019, it had become “possible to legally watch almost every new anime show airing within a few hours of their Japanese broadcast.”¹³ In 2020, even the theatrically-based Studio Ghibli agreed to licensing agreements for its full catalog with HBOMax and Netflix.¹⁴ IGN’s Meghan Ellis sums up this rise, saying: “It’s a far cry from the days of small local conventions and subcultural spaces, and the genre is now irrevocably associated with the cultural zeitgeist of today. And where popularity goes, investment follows.”¹⁵ And where investment goes, so follows enforcement of corporate law. An investment op-ed released in 2013 by the Venrock firm already identified that sites like Crunchyroll were potentially transformative (and lucrative) media platforms, with the caveat that their circulation of unlicensed content would need to be addressed.¹⁶

As you will see in the visual essay that follows, the descent of dubbedepisodes.com and Anime Place from a raucous community with thousands of people watching (virtually) together into a plain text wasteland of abandonware, home to spambots, and a rare forlorn soul, is by no means solely a byproduct of a changing media ecosystem. But, as Whiteman and Metivier’s rare study on the endings of online fan communities expands from Henry Jenkins, “when it becomes increasingly difficult to locate the dividing line between ‘grassroots’ and ‘commercial’ culture . . . can the ‘cultural otherness’ of the fan still be located?”¹⁷ In this way, the study of Anime Place becomes a valuable example of anime fandom’s changing texture precisely because its three phases of heyday, dissolution, and ending throes track an inverse trajectory through the dates of the explosion of legal streaming sites into the commercial mainstream.

The best start date I can mark for the lifespan of the streaming site under observation is

last modified October 16, 2017,

<https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/16/16486436/netflix-original-content-8-billion-dollars-anime-films>.

¹³ Moore, “Anime Is One of the Biggest Fronts in Streaming Wars.”

¹⁴ Moore, “Anime Is One of the Biggest Fronts in Streaming Wars.”

¹⁵ Meghan Ellis, “Why Anime Is the Next Streaming Frontier,” IGN, last modified July 20, 2020,

<https://www.ign.com/articles/why-anime-is-the-next-streaming-frontier-state-of-streaming>.

¹⁶ David Pakman, “An Emerging New Model for TV? Crunchyroll,” Venrock, last modified December 2, 2013,

<https://www.venrock.com/an-emerging-new-model-for-tv-crunchyroll/>.

¹⁷ Natasha Whiteman and Joanne Metivier, “From Post-object to ‘Zombie’ Fandoms: The ‘Deaths’ of Online Fan Communities and What They Say About Us,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10 no. 1 (May 2013): 270.

the creation of the [dubbedepisodes.com](https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes) Facebook page in 2010.¹⁸ By 2015, any given night saw 1500–3000 concurrent users automatically logged into Anime Place via the embedded sidebar chat and the site page had over 10,000 likes on Facebook.¹⁹ By the end of 2017, the streaming site itself had been taken down, with the Anime Place forum reconciled to a meager existence on the Chatango site, now with something in the range of four to seven simultaneous users.²⁰ In 2018, Anime Place’s Chatango platform was stripped to a bare-bones system display, mostly black and white text with standard link colors, with weeks sometimes passing between single posts.²¹ On September 9, 2020, [dubbedepisodes.com](https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes)’s Facebook page posted a relaunch announcement for a site under the Anime Place moniker with aniplc.com as the URL, but by Nov 25, 2020, the site’s Facebook page went silent again.²² As of April 2021, the new site is still online (eventually achieving a redirect from [dubbedepisodes.com](https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes)), with loads of illegal content, including, for instance, Hayao Miyazaki films ringed by malware ads.²³ But perhaps most telling is that despite the wealth of streaming, Anime Place had a forum, vacant except for a couple of dozen posts, with no activity since 2020, its community never reforming.²⁴

The visual essay is entirely composed of screenshots of actual chat content from Anime Place’s chat community during its three phases, forming a data-rich artwork that archives both a concrete space in media history, along with its very real and specific practices, and as such, could be mined by future researchers. But why even bother to so scrutinize such a quotidian aspect of American anime fans’ media consumption infrastructure in the era between discrete media and ubiquitous legal streaming? It is precisely because it was so ubiquitous that it is worth examining. Writing on the films of Harun Farocki, Hal Foster notes that the director “insists that

¹⁸ “DUBBEDEPISODES.COM,” Facebook, last modified November 25, 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes>.

¹⁹ “DUBBEDEPISODES.COM,” Facebook, last modified November 25, 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes>. {AU: Since notes 18 & 19 are identical and in consecutive sentences, I'd like to combine. OK?}

²⁰ “Main Page,” Anime Place, Chatango, last accessed Feb 18, 2018, <http://de.livechat.chatango.com>.

²¹ “Main Page,” Anime Place, Chatango, last accessed Feb 18, 2018, <http://de.livechat.chatango.com>.

²² “DUBBEDEPISODES.COM,” Facebook, last modified November 25, 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/dubbedepisodes>.

²³ “Main Page,” Anime Place, last modified May 21, 2021, <http://aniplc.com>.

²⁴ “Forums,” Anime Place, last modified October 11, 2020, <https://www.aniplc.com/forums>.

visual evidence requires testimony as well as analysis;” and this visual essay is my testimony from a major part of this specific moment in history, played out past the edges of a bootleg space opera.²⁵

As testimony to the lived experience of these commonplace spaces, I found it critical to include all of the ugly, banal, bigoted, erotic, darkly comedic, and inscrutable moments that were always woven throughout (and in the mind of some chat regulars, part of the downfall of) Anime Place and dubbedepisodes.com. Though perhaps ugly, or downright impossible to parse outside of its original insider context, these aspects were not hidden, but omnipresent and mandatory when accessing a top-Google-ranking site that anime fans, both casual and hardcore, experienced.²⁶ Correctly capturing the tenor of these spaces is also critical, since it provides some—admittedly small and somewhat ancillary—clues as to how we got from VHS fansubs in the early 2000s to the well-known trope of racists and misogynists having anime girl avatars in American right-wing politics in 2016.²⁷

While not explicitly referenced in this text, both the visual essay’s artworks and the fan conversations they remix touch on the hollowing-out of one of online anime fandom’s digital commons in favor of unlimited commercial control. The empty fan community echoes the broader hollowing-out of the American public sphere, as the “service model” of streaming media, in which users do not own the content they pay ongoing fees to view, is applied to many other aspects of life, both in leisure and precarious labor. This suite of collages, like most art, cannot directly answer the myriad ethical or sociological questions embedded in online fan spaces. Yet, from its on-the-ground perspective, it can hone in on granular emotional moments and fraught context that resonated forward from the bootleg streaming days, both to contemporary anime fandom and broader social politics, moments, and context that would otherwise be lost in the rapid disappearance that almost always engulfs the flotsam of the internet’s periphery.

²⁵ Hal Foster, *What Comes After Farce?* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020), 114.

²⁶ “Main Page,” Dubbed Episodes, last modified May 21, 2021, <http://dubbedepisodes.com>.

²⁷ Justin Charity, “Why Do Anonymous Twitter Trolls Use Anime Avatars?,” *The Ringer*, last modified Aug 9, 2016 <https://www.theringer.com/2016/8/9/16046698/anonymous-twitter-trolls-anime-avatars-harassment-4chan-8578d36b2920-8578d36b2920>; Max Read, “How Anime Avatars on Twitter Help Explain Politics Online in 2015,” *Intelligencer*, last modified November 5, 2015, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/11/dreaded-anime-avatar-explained.html>.

Content Warning

As noted in the essay, content warnings are myriad with this work: sexism, bullying, racism, drug use, self-harm, suicide, transphobia, homophobia, allusions to incest, and more are documented throughout the visual essay.

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