

Fansubs: Are They Bootlegs?

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Well, with finals lurking just around the corner, there's no better time to write my final article of the school year. Yep, this issue will be the last issue of Absolut Anime, at least for this term. To mark this momentous occasion, I'm taking some time away from writing the usual Binary Babble to do a bit of real babbling on the topic of fansubs. Are fansubs bootlegs or are they a responsible form of distribution by and for fans?

This debate, like the Mac vs. PC, will probably never end, but it's worth talking about. I've always been a believer that fansubs aren't bootlegs. I believe this for a number of reasons:

1. The clubs and fansubbers I know are responsible enough not to distribute commercial titles;
2. I don't believe that anime companies are losing money from fansubbers; and
3. Fansubbers are providing free research for anime companies.

The first argument I expect from the opposing camps is that all three of my assumptions are false. Let me defend my points starting with (3).

The United States, despite the size and diversity of its people, is still a relatively small market for anime. I'm sure that US anime companies must be careful about which titles to license for distribution here. Not only must they dedicate resources for translations, marketing, and licensing costs, but they must deal with the risk of acquiring an unpopular title. There's no guarantee that a popular title in Japan will do as well here in the US, so US companies stand to lose a great deal of money (we can look at Apple and its overestimation of its niche market, or IBM with its miscalculation of consumer demand to see how costly such a small error could be).

Here's a good case in point: Software Sculptors released only four volumes of *Slayers*, perhaps with the thought that it was safer to license fewer episodes, especially if the

series didn't sell. But, as we now know, *Slayers* became far more popular than anyone at Software Sculptors could have realized. Now, they can't afford to license any more episodes, leaving US fans, hanging, disappointed and distrustful. If, on the other hand, Software Sculptors had waited for fansubbers to put out their free versions, the company could have then gauged the demand for the title before they invested any money on the series.

Fansubbers, therefore, help US companies because they take the guesswork out of choosing anime. They put in their own resources to translate and subtitle the episodes. They deal with buying and shipping tapes. From the fansubbers, US companies can see how popular a title can be in the US. The opposing argument to this, of course, is that by the time the US companies are able to do proper licensing and distribution, there will be no buyers because everyone already has fansubs. Granted, there are certain individuals that refuse to buy commercial tapes when they already have watchable free copies, but anime is a niche market that attracts a certain type of person with a special type of personality. Anime fans, on the whole, like and appreciate quality. Often, because of a lack of resources, fansubs are not of the highest quality. How many groups can afford to constantly buy LDs and SVHS tapes to use as sources? How many can afford the time and hard work it takes to produce translations and fansubs? Commercial companies, on the other hand, have the money they need to buy the source materials and equipment. They're the ones with the cash flow to hire professional translators and subbers. If they do professionally work, I think that people will buy.

Also, advertisement works differently in the anime world than in other markets. No matter how many *Ghost In The Shell* posters are hanging up on walls, the number of new fans resulting from this form of advertisement is small. People only become fans when they are introduced to fansubs of many different types, not just one movie, even a good one. Also, if a series is good, the fans already know it and a free posting on rec.arts.anime* will provide a lot of advertisement. Let fansubbers build a fan-following and do the initial advertising for commercial companies.

I guess I already started to talk about point (2). Are companies losing money because of fansubbers? It's difficult to say precisely, but I don't believe that companies will lose out (not anymore than they normally would). I heard someone mention that *Video Girl Ai* won't be released in the US because everyone who wants to see it already has a fansubbed copy. True, I have a pretty good copy of it done by fansubbers, but this series is so good that if a company released it on LD here in the States I would definitely want to go get it. No matter how good a copy, it won't beat an LD, especially

since LD's don't wear out like regular VHS tapes do. Of course, there would still be those people who would still not buy the commercial copy, but I don't think those people would buy the commercial copies anyway, even if fansubbed copies didn't exist. They would probably more likely pirate especially if they couldn't get it for free from fansubbers (I don't believe this argument works with software because if you can't find Word, you can use another word processor, but if you can't find Slayers, you can get an equivalent).

Finally, I come to my first point. This is the toughest argument to make, because a lot of organizations are walking a very fine line between being legal and breaking the law, especially with places that now designate themselves as distributors and not just as clubs. Before, anime clubs and fansubbers traded with each other, but now with distribution centers that deal with larger orders, the line between bootleggers and distributors is blurred. Clubs seem generally very responsible and will remove titles at the request of companies. For the most part, distributors are also pretty responsible. I guess that the main argument is quantity and profit. Bootleggers, in my mind, are those who make large quantities of titles and then sell them to make a profit. Clubs don't do either of these things, while distributors do make a large number of copies. On the other hand, they don't generally do the other, more incriminating activity: make a profit out of their distribution.

Fans are those who support companies. If companies are nice to fans, fans will generally be nice to companies. Shutting down clubs and fansubbers will only drive the whole thing underground, and companies will lose all the benefits of having them around. In my mind, the benefits of having the current system outweighs the disadvantages. Give fansubs a break!