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Web site review

Inside Scanlation

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Inside Scanlation

[1] As an online and contemporary practice, scanlation—the scanning, translation, editing, and sharing of foreign comics, specifically Japanese manga, by fans, for fans—has not been recognized in any major historical account. Outside of academia, a fan with the username "gum" published a compiled history of the American scanlation community entitled *Inside Scanlation* (<http://insidescanlation.com>), on October 3, 2009, providing an in-depth investigation of "the secrets of scanlation, its past, its future, and everything in between...brought to you by people who have created and lived in the world of scanlation." Although produced by fans, the encyclopedic project proves to be valuable as a historical and social resource to fans and other interested readers alike, whether educated in or ignorant of the controversial translations.

[2] Through a narrative history, community profiles, and interviews with both scanlators and American industry insiders, *Inside Scanlation* provides a rigorous, intellectual outlook on the projects, spaces, and collectives that formed around this ethical yet illegal fan practice. The Web site even rivals published scholarly attempts to characterize these decades of fan enterprise. Lee provides an overview of the global trends of scanlation; however, her coverage of its history is limited to one vague statement: "It is difficult to know when manga scanlation began, although anecdotes suggest it might have been the turn of the century or slightly earlier. The number of scanlation groups has increased rapidly during the

past few years" (2009, 1015). Deppey tells a similar, insufficient story: "In the late 1990s...groups of people were beginning to gather into online groups to produce the manga equivalent of fansubs. Thus were scanlations born" (2005, introduction).

[3] Inside Scanlation, as an interactive Web site, provides four sections, comprising 114 pages of documented analysis (History of Scanlation), community profiles (Spotlight), personal exchanges (Interviews), and appendices (Backgrounds, which includes terminology, guides, and technical and anecdotal details). The historical narrative is separated into three epochal chapters of five stages each, reflecting what gum calls "generations" of the scanlation community: the Classical Era, the Golden Age, and the New World. Each periodized "chapter" employs the maximum potential of the Web site format, hyperlinking to other sections of the site as well as to external sources that allow direct interaction with textual conversations that would ordinarily be filed into a bibliography.

[4] In the first chapter, gum examines the origins of the scanlation movement: its uncertain origins in the archived messages of Usenet, which document fan translations of Japanese manga as early as 1989, and a few undertakings that span Geocities, Angelfire, and IRC (Internet Relay Chat). He names a few popular projects and the pseudonyms of the people associated with them, and he explicates an initial history approaching the early 2000s, detailing initial communication among translators and editors, the semantic evolution of the term (including terms such as *fanscans*, *fan lettering*, and *manga fan subs*), and a few complications with members of the American manga industry threatening DMCA claims. In this first chapter, gum sets up many of the prominent elements that tie together the historical narrative: the formation of key players in the scanlation scene, translation projects that would influence later ventures, the technical systems utilized for internal communication and product dissemination, and the initial aesthetic and ethical values that would shape future producers and consumers of online scanned manga. He moves casually from an explanation of MangaProject, the first collaborative venture "to fully scanlate an entire manga," to Toriyama's World, the only large, cooperative project that would rival MangaProject, which bought and scanned *tankoubon* (a compilation of multiple manga chapters) and whose leader (AK of Troy) would be featured in a *Wired* magazine article on the Japanese comics industry in the United States (Thompson 2007).

[5] The first chapter also details the early experiments and controversies of various scanlation groups. While these projects and disputes occurred early in scanlation's short history, they interestingly were rarely or never encountered again in later years. As early as 2001, Japanese art books and Korean *manhwa* were included in scanlation compilations. The Great Manga Application Onidzuka, the first and only open-source translation of a manga (specifically *Great Teacher Onizuka*, by Tohru Fujisawa, to which the project's name wittily refers), exemplifies the close-knit community of translators, editors, and scanners at work in the early years of major scanlation efforts. Toriyama's World, surprisingly, partnered with Viz (a major American manga distributor) to promote the introduction of the weekly Japanese manga collection *Shonen Jump* to American fans, from which the Web site accrued some profits. These exceptional cases of industry involvement appear rarely throughout gum's work (and critical insight begs for a more thorough investigation here), but he elucidates the situation in a neutral light, given that the industry-scanlator relationship has been and continues to be hostile. Reflecting that antagonism, the financial return prompted a number of fellow scanlators to lash out against the group, fueling one of many early debates amongst the population on such topics as the scanning of licensed work and the emphasis on quality over speed or quantity.

[6] Moving into 2002, the second chapter outlines the shift from the dominance of large centralized scanlation groups to communities shaped by aggregation Web sites, which collected announcements of releases from various smaller scanlating teams. While the chapter is robust, gum's impressive referencing of these marginal collectives might alienate readers unfamiliar with this particular historical space. While the first generation of scanlators operated and collaborated on projects primarily via IRC, translating teams of fewer members (mainly members of previous, larger groups with enough experience to attempt their own projects) began to produce greater numbers of translated scans, outpacing the community and necessitating the creation of Web sites that could track the releases in a central space. These sites, gum notes, hosted forums—the next step in community structure—through which the second generation of scanlators flourished, sharing techniques, discussing translations, and offering free services. However, these smaller scanlation groups began to pursue niche genres (erotic game scripts, light novels, and sexualized and amateur comics), further splintering the older and newer translation teams.

[7] From 2002 to 2004, the manga industry in America grew and spread

simultaneously with technology, so that the barriers to entry into both scanlation production and consumption were lowered. The boom in popularity prompted important, though detrimental, changes in distribution and collaboration. As smaller groups branched out into newer modes of production, working on different kinds of content, forming various teams, and gearing themselves toward aggregation Web sites, the older groups remained in the private bubble of IRC, passing around RAW files of original Japanese pages and focusing on delivering quality products. The reputation of older groups overshadowed new teams with their novel values, prompting comments like "the community has lost its focus and purity" as scanlation teams shifted their focus from promoting the spread of manga to distributing free comics online.

[8] The third and final chapter delineates further trends in the American scanlation community: recent activities familiar even to readers inadequately versed in scanning operations. The process from scan to translation having been consolidated, group organization continued to evolve. From 2006 to 2009, the number of releases per day increased dramatically, reflecting three circumstances: the mass popularization of *shonen* titles (for example, *Naruto*, by Masashi Kishimoto) in America, the emergence of newer translation groups previously uninvolved in the community, and the development of new distribution Web sites. The United States witnessed the height of the manga market in mid decade, and alongside the televised airings of *Naruto*, *Bleach*, and other action shows, the manga versions of these franchises also gained popularity. Because these comics were fashionable, many new translation groups focused solely on them.

[9] As the Internet matured and access to Japanese media increased, the newest groups took advantage of the resources compiled by the two previous generations. The informative materials of MangaHelpers and the widespread availability of direct download sites like MangaUpdates created pressure to "speedscan" titles as soon as they were released in Japan, as fans demanded immediate access, regardless of scan or translation quality. The ease of acquiring RAW files and then translated files through download or online reading portals (for example, OneManga) stimulated greater movement away from IRC as the space for community discourse. Furthermore, ad-supported Web sites thrived, as multitudes of fans discovered free manga with a few effortless clicks in a search engine.

[10] The Spotlight, Interviews, and Backgrounds sections of Inside Scanlation

provide well-rounded commentaries and additional source materials to support the strong documentation provided by gum in the historical narrative. He includes profiles of 24 scanlation projects, as well as 66 interviews with members of 50 scanlation groups. Nine supplemental sections provide links to the guides mentioned in the history, as well as analysis and discussion of IRC as a cultural space, legal issues with the industry, specifics of the scanlation of *Naruto*, and stories of intergroup conflicts. The interviews elucidate firsthand backgrounds from experienced scanlators, inspired by questions asked by a community insider.

[11] Gum approaches the imposing issue of the legal gray area (Lee 2009; Deppey 2005) of scanlation with a flat tone. The legality of fan-produced translations is rejected, using multiple examples; however, the style of certain statements suggests that the scanlation community does not fully comprehend the implications of its activities. Still, gum bluntly asserts that the cultural practice of consuming scanlations devalued printed Japanese popular culture in the United States. Regardless, the legal issue has escalated again recently: a coalition of Japanese and American publishers has taken steps to shut down some of the major scanlation sites infringing on Japanese and American copyright laws (Reid 2010). The actions seem to target sites hosting scans of official translations distributed by American publishers—scans being a topic completely ignored on Inside Scanlation—but large communities such as MangaHelpers and OneManga have already removed the entirety of their digital comic archives. Given these developments, it is unfortunate that Inside Scanlation sits quietly as a completed project with no prospective updates, because the site could become an authoritative voice in these debates.

[12] Inside Scanlation is not an academic work: it compiles the results of an attempt to create a historical database for Manga Jouhou, one of the premiere online spaces for the third-generation community. What results is an essential historical resource for a specific fan community. The Web site is fan oriented and uses terms, contexts, and slang whose meanings may not be clear to a reader unfamiliar with scanlation, Internet communities, or the global manga industry. Though its pages chronicle particulars of scanlation groups that might attract fascinated fans, the considered history epitomizes an exhaustive approach that will also attract academic curiosity and scrutiny, given its many references, resources, and contributors. Some concepts are not fleshed out (such as what constitutes a "modern scanlation group"), but the dense hyperlinked details go beyond mere anecdote and make up for some of these lacks. An abundance of

pictorial references to defunct Web sites, abandoned logos, and deleted conversations reinforce Inside Scanlation's value by providing information that even the Internet Archive (<http://archive.org/>) has overlooked. Overall, the Web site alludes to the anime and manga fan sites of the late 1990s that colonized Geocities and other mainstream Web hosts and therefore hints at the scale of a historical artifact. Given its form, we must hope that Inside Scanlation survives better than its predecessors, so that it will remain a valuable historical resource for online fandom.

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