

'Toons with an attitude

Anime: It's not just for kids

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The bartender's head was 3 feet tall, but that didn't bother anyone.

And no one blinked an eye at the tiny carrot-nosed humanoid or the oversized bunny with the vibrating head.

Members of Northern Virginia Anime Anonymous are accustomed to the sights and sounds of Japanese animation — cartoons where the heroes have big mouths and bigger weapons, and the wildlife is as likely to be lethal as wascally.

Once a month, anime fans from around the region gather at the Fairfax County Government Center for all-day sessions of monster thrashing, space battles and romantic fumbling.

"It feels like I can enjoy the cartoons of my youth that have grown up with me," said 27-year-old Susan Jacobs of Richmond, Va.

Jacobs and friend Matt Martin arrived about halfway through the 10½-hour Aug. 10 meeting, conserving their energy so they could stay through the end of the day.

Others displayed no such caution. A crowd of about 30 fans — men and women (though the former were in the majority), black, white and Asian — were in their seats at 12:30 p.m. when the lights dimmed and video screens lighted up in two conference rooms. The smaller room offered shows and movies on DVD, while the other offered cartoons downloaded from the Internet through DivX technology, plus a well-stocked snack table of chips, cookies and soda.

"Groove Adventure Rave" took just seconds to confuse the uninitiated viewer, possibly because one character looked like a talking condom. But the show's entertainment value couldn't be underestimated — over several episodes, the three heroes and their nonhuman friends gambled, reunited with a lost love, mixed it up with bumbling criminals with large posteriors, and battled hordes of demons.

Between each episode, the audience in Conference Room 4 stood briefly to stretch and chat while checking over the snack table.

"Not a very good turnout."

"Yeah, where is everybody?"

"Sandwiches. We demand sandwiches."

Sandwiches — which arrived shortly after 1:15 p.m. — are a relatively new component to NVAA meetings. The group itself is nearly 4 years old, founded by Marc Yu in October 1998 when he couldn't find an existing or-

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ganization to share his love of anime.

Four people attended the first meeting. But membership grew with each session, and a year after it formed the club could no longer fit in Yu's home. Today, there are 250 people on the mailing list. More than 80 might show up for a Saturday meeting, though this session was hampered by nice weather.

Many of the members grew up watching "Star Blazers," [Space Battleship Yamato], "Robotech" [Super Dimensional Fortress Macross] and the other retitled Japanese cartoons that arrived on American soil during the last few decades. They are drawn to anime by its artwork — typified by oversized eyes and mouths — intricate, multi-episodic story lines and character development. Fans say anime reaches out to both genders and all ages with fantasies, science fiction, romance, comedy, drama, children's antics and adult situations.

"It's far more engaging than anything that's done in the United States," NVAA member Keith Andreano said.

Matthew Cleveland, a 24-year-old computer-network administrator, said anime helps feed his interest in Japanese culture and language. He is taking language classes at Northern Virginia Community College and hopes to someday understand shows without subtitles or dubbing.

The club offers the camaraderie of those who love the form and can appreciate the in-jokes that sometimes fly fast and furious during viewings.

"For starters, I've made a lot of friends here. It's really a lot of fun," said one member, who declined to give her name, while taking a short break in a hallway. "Besides, free food. You can't beat that."

Upon returning to the conference room, where a new show was airing, the woman had a bit of advice for a novice: "Don't be fooled by cute animals."

She was right — the cuddly house pet of "Inu Yasha" suddenly turned into a gigantic flying raccoon with its feet on fire.

The afternoon's shows were full of such surprises. "Nadia — Secret of Blue Water" added spaceships and bare midriffs to its source material, Jules Verne's classic novel "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." "Battle Flag of the Stars II" occasionally seemed more like a civics lesson than a space opera.

By 5 p.m., some of the early



Brig Cabe/Journal

Anime cartoons are one thing that animates Christian Brock, the current president of Northern Virginia Anime Anonymous. The group holds monthly daylong viewing sessions at the Fairfax County Government Center in Fairfax, Va.

starters were leaving the air-conditioned confines of the Government Center for the outdoors. Fresh faces took their places in the seats.

Spending an entire day watching cartoons isn't as easy as it might seem, anime veterans said.

"Sometimes it can get a little tiring. The chairs are not necessarily the most comfortable in the world," said NVAA president Christian Brock, who took over from Yu in January. "If you like what you see it doesn't matter."

"Caffeine helps. I have managed to sit through an entire television series, which was 13 hours," Martin said.

The lights went on at 5:20 p.m. for club announcements and a brief walkabout for members who were feeling mobile.

Dave McLean of Germantown, Md. — the "sandwich guy" — took the opportunity to pontificate on the near-mainstreaming of anime. McLean called himself an "old-school" fan of Japanese cartoons, going back all the way to the 1960s and '70s with "Speed Racer" and "Star Blazers."

Anime used to sneak into America during kids' daily and

weekend cartoon times. But now it's on video and DVD at retailers across the country, in movie theaters and on prime-time television via Cartoon Network. Anime's stylized form has strongly influenced American blockbusters like "The Matrix," McLean said.

Japanese animation DVDs and videos rank consistently among the top sellers at the Suncoast movie stores, competing with the likes of "Lord of the Rings" and the second season of "The Simpsons," a company spokeswoman said.

"I don't know why it's getting so popular," McLean said. "[Maybe] all the kids who grew up on it in the '70s got jobs and got money."

After stepping briefly outside for the first time in 5½ hours, it was back to Conference Room 4, where two schoolgirls wearing live fish on their heads were chasing a large spider. "Alien Nine" received lukewarm reviews from the viewers, one calling it "just weird" after a particularly unsettling tongue-bath scene.

Weird is relative. After seven hours of anime immersion, the

talking hand belonging to Vampire Hunter D, star of "Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust," seemed pretty normal.

The night ended in the conference room with four episodes of "Chobits," the misadventures of a panicky teenager and his attractive robot.

The conference room's well-ordered rows of chairs had broken down into a more comfortable mishmash allowing for feet or other body parts to be propped on seats. The chatter had died down as the day went along, and a comfortable numbness set in during the waning hours of the viewing.

The final episode of "Chobits" closed at 10:40 p.m., followed by a flurry of cleaning, vacuuming and chair-straightening. As the group organized for a post-session meal, the topic of choice remained anime, and their enthusiasm showed no signs of wearing down.

"It's more of an emotional sensation than a thrill sensation," said Rob Andrews of Springfield, Va., a senior at George Mason University.

"The roller coaster goes up and down, up and down, up and down."

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