

Kuuki dissected: A conversation with Kishino Yusuke san

I met Kishino-san in our first focus group. On his Mixi diary he described afterwards his experiences in this group (which is what many of our participants do). There, Kishino-san made some suggestions, how “kuuki” could have been analysed in deeper ways – basically he suggested the questions that I really should have asked! I am of course very grateful for such suggestions. My own stupid questions put my conversation partners often in the position of a tourist guide, who has to explain. However, on such Mixi conversations, this position of “tour guide for the gaijin” can be abandoned, and much smarter questions and answers can be developed. This is possible, because the Mixi diaries do not answer to me, but talk to each other (but they are at the same time kicked off by my own stupid first question). One of my own sensei in academia, Professor Bernd Juergen Warneken of University of Tuebingen, calls this effect “irritation”: I irritate with my stupidity, and therefore stimulate intelligence.

So you can imagine that I was keen to meet Kishino-san again. He is a student of Keio, one of the elite universities of Japan, and is in the process of doing a BA, which might be translated as “Sociology of the Information Society”. He is not yet blogging on Hatena and no member of Nico Nico Bu yet.

Kishino-san suggested that we should analyse Kuuki in much more detail (“Kuuki” is the word for “air, atmosphere” and describes on Nico

¹ In this series of short and preliminary (!!) texts we publish first results of the Metadata Project’s ethnographic research on Nico Nico Douga. You can find more under “output” on <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project2.php> and on our research blog: <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/metagold/>.

Nico Douga the “vibe” of the comments). At the beginning of our conversation, Kishino-san introduced us to a two-dimensional model. Kuuki is generated on the one hand through the different forms of commenting (Danmaku, Mishearing, and so on), on the other hand through the different forms of expressing the comments (font size, font color, time, and so on). Different Kuuki are the result of different combinations of these two dimensions.

However, we soon started to notice in our conversation, that two dimensions are not enough to understand Kuuki on Nico Nico Douga. More and more dimensions popped up. So here is a nine-dimensional model (sorry, no possibility for simplicity here) for the dimensions of commenting, which generate, when they are all combined in certain ways, in the different forms of kuuki:

1. Genre of writing. Here you would have to differentiate between, for example, jokes, appreciation, lyrics or mishearing (were you deliberately write down the wrong words).
2. Mood. There are more affective and more analytic comments. Some comments are more playful, others are serious. Some are more for “neta” (the Japanese word for “material for indirectness, irony and jokes”, though this is a very difficult word to translate), some are more “beta” (which describes something like “directness, straightforwardness, honesty”: Beta is often, but not always used in derogative ways – TV soap operas can be described as “beta”, because they lack any sense of irony).
3. Innovation. Many comments are formalised, others are not. Some of them are the newest trend, others have been on Nico Nico Douga since a long time (or 2channel, for that matter).

4. Cryptic-ness. Many comments have hidden meanings. The four sign languages (Katakana, Hiragana, Chinese character and Western alphabet) provide in combination with the spoken Japanese a wide field for puns and double meanings of all sorts of kinds.

5. Dependence. A lot of comments relate directly to the video. However, this is not the only relation they can form. Comments can also take their own life, and the video in the background can lose its significance. There are comments that relate to other comments, to the tags, to the producers blurb, or to the “Nico market” in the bottom, especially when someone has actually bought something there. Such comments are often using arrows to show to what they relate to. There are also many ways, how the comments can relate to the videos: Some of them relate to questions in the subgenre of the surveys, which are asked inside some of the videos. Others are actually the movements of games, which are initiated by videos.

6. Visual style. This includes decisions such as font color and font size.

7. Timing. In some forms of kuuki, the exact timing is important, for example when you “sing along” by writing down the lyrics of the song. At other moments it might be important to announce something earlier, but this could also spoil the “kuuki” in other situations. Users can also decide between scrolling and static comments.

8. Degree of Danmaku-ness in the sense of amount. For some comments the sheer quantity is its reason to be there. A joke can get, for example, more funny, if it is written by many people.

9. Degree of Danmaku-ness in the sense of uniformity. Sometimes, but not always, it is very important to write something similar or even exactly the same like everyone else does. At other moments, it is

important to add another small variation. Exact repetition, which looks at the beginning very strange for Western eyes, can have a lot of different functions: it can enforce appreciation, cover the screen, increase the joke, and so on.

So far the dimensions of commenting. A Kuuki is formed by a combination of decisions on all the nine dimensions above. For different forms of kuuki, some dimensions become more important than others, but they are all present in some form. It is important to catch as much as possible of it. Otherwise you might get flamed, or worse, ignored. But it is not only a question of punishment. If you catch and take part in the kuuki, it makes you happy.

If you think that this is by now all far too complicated, you better stop reading now. It gets even deeper (thanks to the fantastic input and ideas of Kishino-san). The first thing that needs mentioning is: Some Kuukis become established genres. Such kuukis can have their own name (most famous is: Danmaku) and sometimes also get tags.

The second thing that is important: There can be many different kuukis on one video. These different Kuukis in one video influence each other. The same thing happens of course in relation to tags: Certain tags might stimulate certain kuukis.

The third thing: It is also important at what moment of time a kuuki happens: There is, for example, a special kuuki at the end of a video, where people would appreciate the work of the uploader or the producer. In other versions of such an end-of-the-video-kuuki, commenters ironically congratulate each other for having made it so far, and actually watched the whole video to the end.

The fourth thing that you have to know: Each Kuuki itself has a biography, a time, a life cycle of its own. There are at least three

phases that you can distinguish. In the phase of emergence, the general thrift of the kuuki is not yet decided. Then comes the phase of an established kuuki. In the late phase of a kuuki, it can slowly vanish or diminish. It can get further intensified, for example by switching to a full Danmaku. Or it can be changed or “broken” by people, who write against the grain.

Fifth and sixth: Kuukis have different age and different speed. The oldest videos also have old kuukis. Because most of them have not anymore high amounts of traffic, there is also a low speed of comments. The newest videos you find in the ranking. Videos, which are high in the ranking, have also a fast developing kuuki.

The seventh thing: Different users of Nico Nico Douga have different insights into this. There are varying levels of deepness of Nico-chu-ness. Some Kuukis are very hard to catch even for semi-experienced Nico Nico Douga users.

The eighth aspect is something we have totally overlooked so far: Nico Nico Douga incorporates a function that enables users to block certain comments. Blocked comments are not shown on their own personal screen. It is often used to make spam invisible (which has become more prevalent since the introduction of Nico Script, but more about that at another point)). However, users also create with this function their own personal kuuki: A common practice is to mark all derogative comments, so that they do not appear on the screen. This has, as you can imagine, all sorts of implications: users start their own private kuuki-dream-world, and loose the connection to the general thrift.

Last but not least: Most of this is tacit, implicit and incorporated knowledge. You have to feel it. If you think about it, the moment has passed.

So this was what I learned about Kuuki. Piu ...

Kishino-sa, Takashiro-san and me did not only discuss Kuuki. We also discussed another interesting observation of Kishino-san: He thinks that Nico Nico Douga is not so much the structural equivalent of 2channel, but of Comic market: The famous offline event, where hundreds of thousands of Otaku gather several times a year to buy fan-made art (in the last market, there were 450.000 visitors and more than 20.000 amateur producers). Unlike 2channel, and like on comic market, the structure of Nico Nico Douga is based on the structure of producer-content-users. It does not pitch commenters directly against each other, as 2channel does. This might be one reason why the overall kuuki on Nico Nico Douga is so peaceful, and full of mutual appreciation.