

Life and death on Nico Nico Douga – a conversation with Hikawa Ryusuke san

Hikawa-san is probably the most prominent Anime critic of Japan. You can find his articles in prominent magazines, he has written several books and you can also see him often on TV. His writing is known for having a high analytical depth: He is not 'only' a critic, but also an anime film theorist of sorts. Another thing that makes Hikawa-san so special is, how he became prominent: In the early 90ties he started to post comments about Anime series on BBS services like Nifty. His comments were of such high quality that he became a professional Anime critic. In the early 90ties this was an unusual career path.



Hikawa-san, Japan's most prominent anime critic, and a Nico Nico pioneer.

We meet Hikawa-san in a café near to where he lives. He is a gentle man in his late 40ties, and immediately, our conversation enters fascinating territory. Hikawa-san tells us how in the early day of the BBS Nifty, around 15 years ago, anime became soon a topic. Hikawa-san was at that time a communication engineer. Most of the users at

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/>.

that time were engineers, because access to computers was pretty rare, and Nifty was a difficult system to handle. Some of the anime fans on Nifty had the idea to not only chat about anime in the form of threads, but also to develop live chats, just as you can find it now on Nico Nico Douga.

This is how they would do it: Someone would suggest an anime series and episode. Everyone would then record the series from TV on VHS (in Japan, anime are only on TV in the afternoon or very late at night). On one of the following days, all fans would play this recording on their VHS-recorder at exactly the same moment. This way they synchronised viewing. Parallel to this they went on Nifty, so they could comment and share the viewing experience, just like nowadays on Nico Nico Douga.

Unlike today, users were not anonymous, but known by their online ID, so the conversation was much more polite. Normally, a group of no more than 10 participants would share this form of amusement. There was no way to block comments, so it was important to keep such circles small. Otherwise you can find striking parallels: Even 15 years ago, Kuuki was the central concept: The idea of a joint affirmative affect that develops during co-watching. The users were also already using abbreviations for laughing and applauding. Who would have thought, that Nico Nico Douga already existed in a miniscule form in the days of VHS and Nifty?

But we did not only want to interview Hikawa-san as a first hand witness of these early days. I was also curious about his ideas, why anime content is so prominent on Nico Nico Douga. Here, Hikawa-san came up with a fascinating idea. For him, anime are about life and death. Moving and engaging characters emerge out of simple still images. The still images are dead. Affect on the one hand, movement on the other, brings them to live. But even though they are now alive,

one part of you still knows that they are dead: Just a collection of non-moving drawings. So there is on the one hand a movement from death to life, on the other hand the incorporation of death in life. This constellation stimulates fans to repeat this: As there is always the memory of death, they want to re-create this movement towards life. They want to create as well. Comic Market has always answered this desire of the fans, and now Nico Nico Douga has found a new answer on a new level. Smart, ey?

Nico Nico Douga might come into the game just right in time. The Japanese animation industry is in heavy decline. It was always chronically under-funded, and lots of animators live in poverty. However, in the recent years, this situation has worsened. Many Japanese animation studios are now on the brink of collapse. So Nico Nico Douga might also be another form of emergence of life: It might provide a new level of animation. Hikawa-san is sceptical, as he would not ascribe the same artistic credits to mad movies on Nico Nico Douga as he would to the great masterpieces of Japanese animation (and btw, I share this attitude). He adds that animation is made in a collective labour process, whereas mad movies are still done by single persons, as much collectivity as Nico Nico Douga offers. But at least it is a start, and we do not know yet, how the content will develop in this new environment of collective emergence. Hikawa-san watches Nico Nico Douga. That in itself is a sign of hope. <gb>