

Nico Politics in a Cosplay Cafe: A conversation with Midouoka-san

Midouoka-san is a much debated figure on the Japanese Internet. He has gained his fame on 2channel. Though 2channel is usually a place for anonymous posting, Midouoka-san became a known figure (don't ask me, how he did that). He says he likes to get into heated debates, and if you do so, you are bound to make not only friends. There is even a sub community on Mixi, which was originally set up to "watch" his online activities. However, after the original leader of this group quit, Midouoka-san himself took over this position. So: Midouoka-san is subversive. He is also one of the persons that have melted with their laptops. While we talk, he constantly plays videos or looks up content, especially on "Nicipedia" – the user-generated Nico Nico Douga dictionary that is only 2 weeks old, but already has thousands of entries.

I met him as a generous, helpful and nice guy, and we spend a pleasant evening in Ikebukuro. Our evening starts with a stroll around "Otome Road" in the Tokyo district Ikebukuro. Our next stop is a Cosplay Café. Waiters and waitresses in such Cosplay Cafés not only dress up in anime inspired costumes. More importantly, they talk to the Otaku-guests. Otakus are known to be shy. The waitresses and waiters make conversation about their favourite topics, listen to their obsessions, and have the background knowledge for detailed conversations, mostly about Mangas, games, characters and Anime

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/>.

series. There are many different styles of Cosplay Cafés: In some of them waitresses dress up in anime costumes, in others boys dress up as 'butlers'. Since last year, Cosplay Cafés with boys in maid costumes became highly popular.



Cosplay costumes on sale on Otome road

The particular Cosplay Café that Midouoka-san brings me to, is hidden away on the fifth floor, and it has not more than 10 places to sit. Every once in a while one of the Otaku-costumers sings an anime opening song. The waitress in maid costume sometimes takes part in our conversation, as it is her job to do so. The walls are full of signatures of famous writers, drawers and other Otaku heroes. Midouoka-san explains that in this bar you often find legends of Tokyo's Otaku world. In this environment we start to talk about the legal side of Nico Nico Douga. Midouoka-san has a background in media law, and I learn from him that the copyright holders could delete almost all content on Nico Nico Douga, if they decide to do so.

In the early days of Nico Nico Douga you could find a lot of full anime episodes, but nowadays these episodes are deleted quickly after they are uploaded. But it does not stop here. Japanese Copyright is very strict when it comes to the manipulation of copyrighted characters. This means: Not only full anime episodes, but also all re-edited content is not safe, no matter how short and how modified it is (in fact, the more modified it is, the more vulnerable). All re-edited content is constantly under the sword of possible deletion, though it is normally not deleted, as the rights holders do not ask for deletion.

This becomes important information for the further research.

Midouoka-san describes Nico Nico Douga as a giant experiment that pushes the limits of copyright, but it is at the same time still fully under control of the copyright holders.

In our conversation we discuss, whether this situation is best analysed in the theoretical frameworks that have been developed recently to understand the relationship of copyright and immaterial and affective labour. The usual argument would go like this (in a simplified form): A brand, a character or any other cultural artefact is produced in parts by the creative labour of the professional producers, but also, just as importantly, by the affective labour of the fans. These producers (the creatives and the fans) are the true owners of the content, because they together have done the immaterial work to create it, and not the content owners. However, the labour of the fan is neither paid for, nor has he any rights. Indeed, the fan has to often pay for the possibility to provide his affective labour.

From this perspective, Nico Nico Douga has an interesting double character: On the one hand it can be seen as an instrument to extend the affective labour of the fans, who now not only watch and love, but also comment, co-create and co-develop the content – in that way Nico Nico Douga is somewhat similar to Web 2.0 application in the West, albeit more effective. On the other hand Nico Nico Douga is a subversive experiment, which undermines, stretches and questions copyright. The usual Web 2.0 platforms in the West do this to a much lesser degree. Nico Nico Douga has more of this other side not only because Japanese copyright law is tighter, but also because the forms of content are more complex. This is another reason, why Nico Nico Douga is so much more interesting.

Midouoka-san says that in a way he shares this perspective, though he normally would not think about Nico Nico Douga in this way (and I

myself would also add that this is only one way of looking at Nico Nico Douga, and one that is probably a pretty Western perspective). It is important to keep in mind that Niwango, the company behind Nico Nico Douga, does not profit from Nico Nico Douga. In opposite, it is burning quite a substantial amount of money. It is more the traditional content owners themselves, who might profit from the extended affective labour of the fans. At the same time they are threatened by it. Niwango is in a peculiar position in the middle of this constellation, and it will be exciting to see the further moves of Niwango in the next year.

We also talk about the politics on Nico Nico Douga in a more direct way: Videos with open political content. Even though Nico Nico Douga is mainly a place for entertainment, there are also corners where you can find such political videos. There is hardly any political censorship, if it is not illegal under Japanese law, or mistreats images of the Tenno (a favourite pastime on the Japanese internet). Japan would not be Japan, if the question of Japanese war crimes in China would not be one of the mayor topics here. But you can also find videos of politicians and politic mavericks, the most famous one of these is Toyama Kouichi. At some point soon I have to find more about this.

While we are talking about this, we are not anymore sitting in a Cosplay café (in a Cosplay Café you pay your drinks by the hour...), but in a Western style café. It is in this atmosphere, where Midouoka-san tells me that after all this politics we should not forget that Nico Nico Douga is mostly a place to relax. He sees Nico Nico Douga as a part of a triangle of three platforms: Mixi and 2channel are the other corners of it. On 2channel you discuss and sometimes have a good fight. On Mixi you network and write about yourself. Nico Nico Douga is the place where you find relief from all that. And this is exactly his own practice. After a long session on Mixi and 2channel he goes to Nico Nico Douga and enjoy the positive, affirmative and anonymous Kuuki

with the other Nico Chuu. An experience of peace, even for an Internet-samurai like Midouoka-san.