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*Series: Nico Nico Douga Texts[1]*

## Story and backstory in the age of metadata – A conversation with Sikii-san

With Sikii-san we were able to interview another highly prominent Imas-blogger. Sikii-san is based in Kyoto, but Takashiro-san originally met him in Tokyo, where the members of Nico Nico Bu organised an offline meeting to meet him. This was a telling event, as Sikii-san's blog is different from other Imas blogs. He writes for light Imas fans. On his blog he aims to introduce Imas mad to a wider audience. At the same time, he aims to be a voice for this audience. Sikii san worries that their tastes might otherwise get overheard in the discussions of the Imas bloggers, who are usually deep Imas fans. Whilst many Imas bloggers care for details in production value or sophisticated twists of meaning, Sikii-san, in opposite, thinks that values such as humor and backstory should not get lost. Sikii-san's aproach is close to Arimura-sans blog, who provides a voice for young anime fans. Both are outsiders, but outsiders with a large following, and outsiders that command high respect in the Nico Nico Bu community.

This is not the only reason, why we wanted to talk with Sikii-san. Before Sikii-san started to write about Imas, he was already a prominent blogger. At that time, he mainly wrote about 'eroge' – digital games that include explicit sexual content. Japanese eroge are one of the many origins to which you can trace the aestethics of Nico Nico Douga. According to Sikii-san, there are two main forms of eroge. One immediately shows sex scenes, and is mainly used for "practical purposes", as he gently puts it. The other one contains sex

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scenes as well, but only scarcely and late in the story. But even eroge of the latter kind are sold for their erotic content. This is crucial. As they are sold anyway, no matter how the story unfolds, such eroge provide a unique space for experimentation. Sikii-san tells us that some of the most interesting forms of storytelling in the last decade have emerged here.

To talk openly about eroge shows already, how brave Sikii-san is. He does not shy away from topics that many would not talk or write about in public. His braveness was proven by another move: He was the only Nico Chuu, who invited us to his private home. This might sound strange in a research project that calls itself ethnography-ish. But in Japan, it is actually quite hard to get invited to a private space. Nico Chuu were happy to talk to us extensively, but meetings would normally happen in cafes or bars. The private space remains private. As Sikii-san provided us with this unique opportunity, I had to ask him whether I can take a picture of his computer – so here it is:
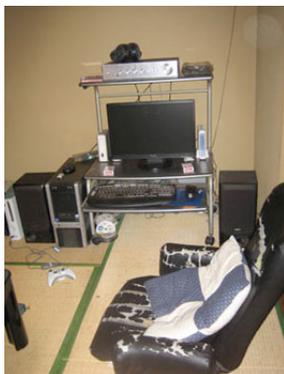


*The computer of Sikii-san, the legendary eroge and Imas blogger*

We did not only look at this computer, we also used it. Of course I was curious to have a look at eroge. Some of them are 2D and some 3D. Japan would not be Japan, if the transfer from 2D to 3D would not be highly debated. 2D eroge have not died, and many erogames still live on the combination of writing and still images. 3D animation, on the other hand, takes a lot of its aesthetic of 2D animation. But 3D has

also added a new dimension to eroge. Sikii-san showed me one 3D eroge that felt almost like a 3D shooter game, only that you did not shoot the characters, but groped them – and once more, Japan would not be Japan, if these characters would not be female, very, very young, and first tell you off, and then move on to stuff that Sikii-san preferred to not show me.

Sikii-san turned out to be a great teacher. His next lesson about the background of Nico Nico Douga was an introduction into the culture of "anime mad" – another direct ancestor of the mad videos that you find on Nico Nico Douga. Anime mad are music videos (often of heavy metal kind), which use visual fragments of anime and manga. They are either produced by the bands themselves, or by fans. Many amateur anime mad creators have become professional creators of music videos or anime intros. Even though one would think that anime mad is an uniquely Japanese invention, their origins can be traced also to US-American anime and manga fans, and Taiwanese and Korean amateur creators have also made important contributions. Sikii san has no high interest in anime, but he enjoys anime mad, and has done so many years before Nico Nico Douga came along.

If you dive deeper into the pre-history of the mad movies, you arrive at the culture of "mad tapes". These were cassette tapes that contained re-edited humerous collection of news. They were distributed between Japanese university students, via direct exchange, from person to person. This mad culture transferred itself to the culture of flash movies and then into anime mad. Mad movies, in turns, could be downloaded, bought on comic markets or mail ordered. It was a small culture, until Nico Nico Douga came along and made it big. It also changed it. Mad movies now use a much wider variety of sources, mix them more madly and, most notably, have integrated the "eye pleasure" of watching virtual character as well as real persons dance. Dance pleasure was introduced with Nico Nico Douga and especially

pioneered by the Imas genre. Most Imas characters are female. The Abe-san-subgenre introduced the male dancer. And then came along the explosion of mostly male dancers who dance the choreographies of the female Imas characters. This evolution continues.

I got especially excited when I started to understand Sikii-san's ideas around the question of story. On the one hand, eroge provided a free space for weird narratives that can otherwise not be told. Sikii-san told me that eroge have provided him with a form of "narrative pleasure" that is in way similar to reading literature – only that he found this "narrative pleasure" exactly in the realm, where you would mainly place "eye candy". On the other hand, mad movies in their different incarnations as anime mad and mad movies provide him with "eye candy" of watching dance. They give up the classical idea of story. So is this the death of story that has so long been predicted, I asked him. Maybe be, but at the same time we can observe the birth of a new significance of backstory. This applies, according to Sikii-san, to both mad movies and eroge. Why?

Let's start with mad movies. Mad movies can only be understood, if you know the character's backstories. These backstories are twofold: On the one hand you have to understand their unique profile, which is shaped by the roles that they formerly played in the original anime or mangas or games. Nico Nico Douga has added to this backstory a second layer: Part of the backstory of the character is now their development on Nico Nico Douga: The history of the changes of the character that were developed in the process of the creation of thousands of mad movies. These two forms of backstory melt into one. They create the meaning of each character.

Many individual mad movies then ad a third layer: The characters meet. This creates a form of open, non-linear story: Backstories of different kinds and different characters interact with each other. You

will not see that, if you do not know the backstories. Sometimes it can be enough to just show two characters at the same time on the screen to trigger of this new form of non-linear story. At the same time such mad movies are also part of the further development of the character's backstory. The characters transform themselves in the video and through the video. You can see the backstory emerge almost in real time. So you can see: The main centre of the narrative has moved form story to backstory, but there is still something like story, though now fully based on backstory.

But what about eroge? Shiki-san tought me that their pleasure comes out of a strong combination of backstory and weird story (Sikii-san loves sci-fi-eroge). This combination becomes especially powerful, if you start to watch anime mad and eroge together. There is a close relation between anime mad and eroge: Many anime mad videos use images of eroge, and many eroge integrate music in an anime mad style. This is not the only connection. When anime mad use material of eroge, they enrich the backstories of the eroge characters, and thus make the eroge stories more meaningful and weird. So both genres do not only profit from each other, because they market each other. They also enrich each other's meaning, each other's narrative pleasures. Combine this with the "eye pleasure" of the characters in eroge and mad movies, and you might get an impression of the levels of fun that Sikii-san has.

What I learned here from Sikii-san is a literature theory of sorts, But why is it interesting for the metadata project? What has all this to do with metadata? Well, I would argue: A lot. Maybe it is best to start once more with a non-technical definition of metadata. Backstories are implicit metadata. The process of its emergence is organised by a second form of metadata: Backstories in Sikii-san's world do not develop in one single piece of video only, but in many, and metadata organises this transtextual emergence. Nico Nico Douga has taken this

processes and automatised them in the metadata in a more technical sense. Backstories are now consolidating themselves in the form of tags. Maybe this is one explanation why the unique forms of tagging came so naturally out of Nico Nico Douga: The platform simply took an already existing form of cultural practice and automated it.

This seems to be an important result about Nico Nico Douga. Its genius lies in automating processes that are already there in non-automated forms. We might be able to lean here something for the future design of metadata systems. It also seems to me like a confirmation of our approach: We aim to combine a non-technical and a technical definition of metadata. If you take this approach, you can observe processes, where the former are translated into the latter. Technical metadata are not anymore an artificially added layer of order on top of a database. Instead, successful technical metadata automate already existing metadata in a non-technical sense.

Sikii-san's development of taste mirrors exactly this. Around one year ago, Sikii-san moved on from the wild genre of eroge to the seemingly much more harmless genre of Imas. The reason: Imas has the highest degree of this multi-leveled forms of backstory, combined with high degrees of "eye pleasure". The collective of 1700 amateur Imas producers on Nico Nico Douga create a highly complex web of backstories, based on Nico Nico Douga's forms of metadata management. Sikii-san himself is now at another turning point of his development. Like many other Imas fans, he has recently bought an Xbox and the Idolmaster game. Even though he says that he is not a passionate gamer, he felt it necessary to learn how to play the game, to be able to write even better about the genre of Imas mad.

You might also now understand, why Sikii-san has recently become a strong and active voice in the Japanese online debates around intellectual property: His form of consumption can only work, when IPR

are handled loosely. He is especially critical, when fans start to apply censorship on each other. Some fans have argued: We should not infringe copyright too much, otherwise we risk, what we have. Sikii-san is an outspoken activist for a braver approach. Along this lines, he welcomes Niwango's recent change of policy: Niwango now names the institutions that demand to delete content. This puts content holders under pressure – for their own good, Sikii san would argue.

By the time Sikii-san had told me all that, I was already quite drunk. Sikii-san had brought us to his favorite bar, and introduced us to some of is preferred brands of Sake. But this is not the only reason, why I started see in him the Walter Benjamin of Nico Nico Douga: Sikii-san has indeed a lot in common with Benjamin. On his blog he addresses mainstream users on a high level that does not compromise quality. He is an archeologist of media, and traces the history of mad movies to their sources. He developed a literature theory, where he shows that the narrative lead has moved from story to backstory. And, last but not least, he has become an outspoken critique of existing forms of property – a position that he develops out of his analysis of narrative in the times of metadata. You can imagine: I was deeply impressed.