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Some lessons for us beginners by an Otaku

Right in the beginning of my research in Tokyo I had an informative dinner with X (who wants to stay anonymous). This dinner was important, because I had almost no clue about the world of Otaku, when I arrived. X describes himself as a proud Otaku, and gave me an introduction into some of background knowledge that is necessary to understand Nico Nico Douga. But first a word, why X wishes to stay anonymous. Otaku are still stigmatised in Japan, and Otaku themselves have equivalent derogative terms for the mainstream ("ria-juu" = anyone who is not an Otaku, and "niwaka-otaku" = someone, who wants to be an Otaku, but fails). The boundary between Otaku and mainstream culture might have weakened in the recent years, and in some ways Nico Nico Douga functions as a bridge between these two worlds, but it has not lost its significance.

X gave me first a basic introduction into the workings of the legendary BBS (Bulletin board system) 2channel, the direct predecessor of Nico Nico Douga. 2channel is important for Nico Nico Douga in many ways. Most importantly, it has made the culture of anonymous posting popular – it might indeed be a Western misconception to see Nico Nico Douga as a form of Youtube plus BBS. More precisely, it is a BBS plus video. The BBS culture was there first, and it remains the central driving force of Nico Nico Douga.

Screenshot of a discussion on 2channel (which happens to be about Nico Nico Douga)

Posts on 2channel normally only appear under the IP address -. Entries are therefore not only anonymous in the sense that they are hidden under a pseudonym. Normally it is impossible to connect the many entries that one user has made. Theoretically, people can also create an identity, but this is tricky, and hardly ever done. 2channel is all about radical anonymity, and this was its great revolution. Before 2channel, netiquette stifled the Japanese web. With 2channel, suddenly everything was possible. 2channel was in the beginning almost exclusively a place for Otakus. Since the book and the movie "Densha Otoko", 2channel became more mainstream. However, it is still semi taboo. If someone admits that he or she posts on 2channel, he or her takes in a way responsibility for the whole content of 2channel – and no one would want to do that, as this content can be quite rough.

2channel pioneered the practice of commenting video content. Even before Nico Nico Douga was launched, it became popular to post comments on TV shows while they were broadcasted. A show can generate 30.000 posts during the time it is running. That means: People are posting so fast that no one can read it. Single comments are indistinguishable, only the crowd counts. This is pleasurable, because one becomes part of this crowd – X said, it is like in a Rock

concert: one is part of a temporary community. Without this background, the success of Nico Nico Douga can not be explained. We in the West of course also have the kids who post instant messages to their peer group while they watch the same TV program. But the key difference is the anonymity. Furthermore, 2 channel is also the reason why Ascii art has never lost its popularity in Japan. On 2channel Ascii art has lead to new forms of narratives: People post series of Ascii images and connect them to stories. The Ascii art is mostly copy and pasted, though then sometimes slightly modified. Such stories are produced collectively, and different users add new turns in the story. This works pretty much like a RPG (Role playing games).

So X also needed to teach me a little bit about the Japanese game cultures that contribute to Nico Nico Douga's success: He, for example, is part of a relatively small community of people who develop RPGs. Such self-made games often take two characters of different animes, combine them and then imagine what happens. The creator scripts this encounter, builds in challenges like fights or puzzles, and then distributes the game. Creators often film themselves while they play their own game. And this is where Nico Nico Douga comes in. X enjoys to watch and comment such uploaded movies, because it is a mix of two pleasures: On the one hand he can admire the skill of the gamer, on the other hand he enjoys the story of the game. The former relates to the childhood experience, when several kids were sitting together, only one could play, and all the other were watching and commenting. The latter looks at games in a similar way to movies: The main character is the action hero.

There is much more to be learned here, but at this place I want to mention only one more thing that I found particularly interesting: flaming on Nico Nico Douga (that is: bombard a video with negative comments). X said that people mostly flame, if someone does things where other people have to suffer. One example: One guy filmed

himself creating a huge pork and rice dish, with a high pile of pork on it. He created this dish, while he was working in a restaurant chain. Soon people started to flame him, because one can see in this video that he puts the pork back to the pot, from which customers are served. A second video shows guys driving into a McDonalds, ordering food and driving away. In both cases these people inflicted damage to others. Such videos get flamed. This made me ask X, whether NND is moralising. He disagreed. These two video makers were flamed, because other people were harmed. A different example would be the videos where people cook and eat huge amount of – say – curry. In that case the uploader might feel ill afterwards, but they only hurt him– or herself. In his view flamed videos are videos of "people, who go to law school", and "who used to bully us". The community of Nico Nico Douga flames the strong, flames the (former) bullies, under which Otakus had to suffer in real life.

Youtube is seemingly all about UGC (user generated content), but in fact it is the platform for the extroverted, or, in the view of X: of the bullies. Nico Nico Douga, in opposite, took the culture of 2channel, and that is the culture of the Otakus, into the mainstream. The dominant group remain the Otakus. Flaming, which looks at first sight like collective bullying, is in fact the opposite: It is the revenge of the formerly bullied Otakus, who can now stand up as a collective and flame the videos of the strong and extravagant bully-types. The Otakus can come up with strong moral rules (like: do not hurt other people). And they also make sure that their own visual culture – anonymous, collaborative, and mostly based on anime imaginary – stays dominant on Nico Nico Douga. The commenting function does indeed de-throne the author. The formerly weak are here as an anonymous collective strong.