

Evolution as narrative: A conversation with Yoshikawa Hideyuki san

Yoshikawa-san is the second “organic intellectual” of the Nico Nico Douga community that we meet (the first one was Hamano-san, you can read about him in NND Text Nr. 4). Even though Yoshikawa-san never uses this word, “organic intellectual”, it describes for me best the role that Yoshikawa-san takes in the community of Nico Nico Douga: He is part of a group of people, who blog about Nico Nico Douga on Hatena, and communicate intensely with each other via Twitter. This sub-community of experts is based on organic collaboration: Some concentrate in the development of add-on software, others collude statistical data, and then there are the more analytically minded, like him or Hamano-san. Even though such a role of the analyst would place him normally outside the community (in a similar position as I myself find myself in), Yoshikawa-San stresses that he is part of this organic whole of Nico Nico Douga expertise.



Yoshikawa-san

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/>.

But I am jumping ahead. Let me first introduce Yoshikawa-San. He works in one of the leading Japanese think tanks, and conducts his research on Nico Nico Douga in the few moments of spare time he has. He has covered Nico Nico Douga on his blog, where he came up with an extremely interesting idea about Nico Nico Douga. This idea was originally developed in reaction to Hamano san, who once remarked that Nico Nico Douga feels like a shooter game (this is immediately plausible, because to write comments does indeed feel a bit like shooting). Yoshikawa-san took up this idea, but gave it a new twist. For him, Nico Nico Douga is not like a shooter game, but like a RPG (role playing game - see the entry "lessons by an Otaku").

According to Yoshikawa-san, Nico chuus take sub-genres (that is: the categories) on Nico Nico Douga as if they were roles in an RPG. If they produce a video with a vocaloid, they become part of a storyline of emergence of that vocaloid. If they produce a video of "tried singing", they immerse themselves in the role of the emerging genre of "tried singing". Sub-genres are less descriptive categories than game identity. The uploaders are not only using the material of their predecessors, they take on the role that their predecessors have created. This does not only apply to the producers, but also to the majority of Nico Nico Douga users, who do not produce videos themselves. They take part in this giant RPG with their comments. At the same time they provide the essential motivation for the producers: viewing figures, comment figures and the comments themselves are the price, which the producer/role player gains. And the viewers and commenters, who provide the producers with this price, share the price with the producer, as they are part of that process of emergence as well.

For us at the metadata project this is indeed eye-opening. It provides us with a much more elaborative version of our first hunch that on Nico Nico Douga, it is not metadata that serves content, but content

that serves metadata. Such subgenres are tags, which became so consistent and powerful that they can serve as a role, and can stimulate their own further development. This explains why the negotiation of these tags is so important to the users – a negotiation that can take the form of tag-was, as we have learned. Tags provide the frame for emergence.

Yoshikawa-san himself is understandably very careful to push his analysis so far, not only because he is as a professional an expert in knowledge management and therefore does not use the term metadata as loosely as we Goldsmiths-academics do. Yoshikawa-san is much more precise. In his empirical analysis, Yoshikawa-san has followed some of the early months of the birth of the now legendary vocaloid Hatsune Miku. Hatsune Miku emerged in an evolutionary process that was mostly driven though the innovations by her growing fan community. Yoshikawa-san shows us the visualisation of his empirical analysis, which he allowed us to publish on this blog, so this image might gave you an idea:



Some weeks in the early days of Hatsune Miku, documented Yoshikawa-san

In the beginning, Hatsune Miku was just a vocal synthesizer software, which was based on a system originally developed by Yamaha. In the months to follow the release of that vocal synthesizer, Miku first emerged as a drawn character, then acquired her own original theme

tunes, appeared on her first music video, emerged as a anime character, acquired 3D characteristics, and now finally became a visual software tool.

Such an evolution is not fully predictable and yet a compelling narrative. To make this even more interesting, these narratives are multi-linear. Some fans still produce videos of Hatsune Miku in her two-dimensional stage, while at the same time the 3D-animated Hatsune Miku is just another branch in a constantly evolving field on Nico Nico Douga, next to the many other vocaloids that were born, since she came along.

Although one could argue that characters like Hatsune Miku are at the forefront of the decline of narrative in the sense of scripted drama, their evolution itself is now the narrative. This, at least, seems to be what I have also learned from other conversations with Nico Chuus: They observe the evolution of the characters, which they drive themselves forward, with the same fascination like past audiences would follow the twists and turns of the fate of a soap opera character or a manga hero.

Evolution as an open and multi-linear narrative, driven forward by the same audience who enjoys this narrative, and evolving under the roof of an identity that is held together by collectively negotiated tags, which in turns become semi-scripted roles for the users, just as the half scripted and half open role in a role playing game – this seems to me indeed to catch the spirit of Nico Nico Douga. Yoshikawa-san himself is much more careful in his analysis, so please forgive my overboarding enthusiasm of an outsider.