

Dimensions of Imas: Talking to members of Nico Nico Bu

‘Nico Nico Bu’ is a network of around 200 bloggers on Hatena, who all blog about Nico Nico Douga. A lot of these blogs recommend specific Nico videos, but there are also bloggers, who tackle technical problems, generate Nico Nico Douga statistic, discuss the effectiveness of tags, or provide cultural and social research – Hamano-san and Yoshikawa-san, who I interviewed earlier, are prominent examples. The most prominent member of Nico Nico Bu is Koizuka-san, who is credited for inventing Nico Nico Douga.

Nearly all members of Nico Nico Bu are male, with the known exception of three female members. A lot have a professional background in computing. The members of ‘Nico Nico Bu’ also communicate extensively on twitter. In fact, the idea to form Nico Nico Bu first came up on twitter. As twitter is a less usual means of communication in the West, here is a quick explanation: Twitter allows you to send short text messages to an internet portal, and from there they are forwarded to the people, who decided that they want to follow you. In the case of Nico Nico Bu you have to imagine a constant stream of short messages filled with recommendations, personal thoughts, new ideas, gossip, or just updates what the members are on about at the moment.

Our meeting was a mix between a focus group and a Nico Nico Bu offline meeting. Next to Takashiro-san, our interpreter Graham and me there were six participants: Ohhoi-san, whose blog is named after

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/>.

a pun of 'old man' and the widely known product name for a cockroach trap; Hide-san, who is in his spare time a producer of 'Imas'-videos (more about that later); Arimura-san, who blogs about anime and also works as a critic for anime magazines; Kido-san, who showed us a lot of Nico videos on his ipod, Natsumikan-san, who is credited for founding Nico Nico Bu; and Hanamigawa-san, another very old member of Nico Nico Bu, and one of its co-founders.

The meeting lasted all in all about 8 (!) hours. The first three hours took the structure of a more formal focus group-ish discussion. The second four hours were accompanied with lots of beer and some nico-food: Moyashi (= bean sprout) are considered to be nico-food, because one character on the game Idolmaster is poor and always eats Moyashi at a special offer.

To summarise 8 hours of extremely interesting discussion in one post is impossible – especially when the discussion enters such “deep” levels as it did here. When a Nico Chuu says that a discussion is “deep”, details of lesser known meanings and styles are discussed. This means also: As soon as the discussion gets “deep”, I am lost. I have to be grateful that Graham-san, our translator, can take over in such moments, as he is capable of entering some of the more subtle regions of Nico talk. When I ask questions, the ‘deepness’ is gone, and people have to take the effort to explain very, very basic stuff.

Our first session started with a discussion about the favourite tags of our participants, and I could have easily listened to it for the rest of the scheduled time. Apart from many funny tags, I learned that tags can order themselves to express rising strength. One tag might express that something is weird, another one that is very weird, and so on. At the moment, the tag for the weirdest videos on Nico Nico Douga is called “failure of modern science”, but this tag will probably soon be topped by another tag. A month ago I discussed with my colleague

Yuk Hui in London the possibility of tags, which do not only label something as “red”, but as “80% red”. Once more I make the experience that the users of Nico Nico Douga have already invented it.

The next part of our discussion entered the realm of “Imas”-videos. These videos use characters and software of the X-box game “Idolmaster”. The game asks you to produce pop idols by making the right decisions: Selecting the songs, her dress, choreographing her dance, etc.... It is very popular in Japan, because Idolmaster was one of the first 3D-based games that incorporated the look of 2D animation (which is where beauty lies in Japanese popular culture). Imas-mad-videos were also one of the first genres that became popular on Nico Nico Douga. As many members of Nico Nico Bu are also very early users of Nico Nico Douga, Imas-videos play a very special role on Nico Nico Bu.

Many Imas-mad-videos are user-produced music videos. As so many things on Nico Nico Douga, Imas-mad-videos have become by now very complex. Many different subgenres have evolved: Videos that make you laugh, videos that express the affection of the producer towards a specific character, videos that amaze with outstanding technical abilities, styles and production values, videos that stage encounters of different Imas-characters, footage of people, who play the original Idolmaster game, or videos that transfer the Imas characters into different settings (for example war settings). One Imas-video can of course belong to several of these subgenres at once.

Many Imas-mad-videos are spectacular showcases of the skills of their amateur producers, who do not only manipulate the character and the songs, but also show the skill in lip-synchronising (which has to be done by hand and takes a lot of time), camera patterns, editing, effects and inserting different background. There is by now fan-produced

software that helps you doing this. Some of the producers have risen to fame – Wakamura-P is probably the biggest star among them. Recently he appeared on a NHK TV show, where he was hiding behind a mask to protect his anonymity.

The original game Idolmaster contains 12 characters. All members in this group know all 12 characters, and they stress that to fully enjoy the videos, you have to understand, who they are. When different characters perform with each other in one music video, this might, for example, encapsulate an implicit back-story of their complicated relations with each other: They might have a crush on each other, or might be burning with jealousy. Some of these personal traits have also developed beyond the game. “Miki”, for example, was originally more of a slacker-type, but recently she has started to work harder for her career, and you can see this represented in her newest music videos (bear in mind: these are all user-produced videos of avatars, not “really real” people).

The whole discussion of the Imas-genre was seriously undermined by my ignorance: How can you discuss the details of the style of a specific producers, or the latest turns in the development of a character, when the gaijin in the room constantly asks questions like: “Could you please explain me, how many characters there are?”. So the members of the group were probably quite relieved when our discussion moved on to the more general territory of Nico Nico Douga as a whole.

During this discussion we came up with a model that helped me to map the video content on Nico Douga. There are at least three basic dimensions of video content. The first dimension is constituted by the different genres, subgenres, and sub-subgenres, which are, in turns organised in tags. Examples of the broad overall genres would be “Imas-mad”, “Toho”, or “Tried singing”. An example of a subgenre would be the videos of a specific Imas character. So far, so easy.

The second dimension is formed by style: Any of these genres and subgenres could use 3D animation, original footage, 2D drawings, interactive quizzes or wild forms of content collages. Again, these styles all have sub-styles. Videos can also be edited faster or slower – there is a whole culture in Nico Nico Douga of re-editing and condensing longer videos into ever-shorter units (these videos are called “for busy people” or, when they are only some seconds long, “for really busy people”). This example also shows, that styles consolidate themselves through tags, too.

Many genres have a tendency to adopt a particular style: Imas-mad-videos, for example, are mostly 3D animation. However, the distinction of style and genre still helps to bring a certain order into this confusing field, as there are also fan-made 2D drawings of Imas characters out there. To take another example: The famous Abe character (that is: a subgenre) started as 2D drawing, but he is now a 3D animation, and you can also find a lot of filmed footage of people posing and dancing like Abe.

The third dimension is the difference between user-collected and user-generated content. User-collected videos would typically consist of content found on television or Youtube. Purely user-generated content would be a self-drawn Manga with a newly invented character that is arranged in slides (you can find quite a lot of this on Nico Nico Douga). However, most content on Nico Nico Douga is situated somewhere in between: Imas videos, for example, use commercial software with set characters, but create new narratives, develop the characters further and so on. You also have to take into account that a lot of videos are re-edited versions of re-edited versions of re-edited versions.

If you look at particular videos, you will often see at different points many different genres and styles, and these videos mix also at different points different forms of user-collected and user-generated material on different levels. However, again I would argue that this is not something that undermines this model, but you can still explain this though it. These three dimensions are of course not the only dimensions of Nico Nico Douga. There is, for example, the distinction of “pure” genre in the one hand, and staged encounters between characters of different subgenres or genres on the other. But for now I want to not spoil the simplicity of this model.

There is one very important limitation to bear in mind: This model only enables you to map the video content. Comments are excluded. This is nothing trivial. Comments are just as important on Nico nico Douga as the videos themselves. In fact, I tend to say that comments are much more complicated than the video content. But again: This is another reason to keep the map of the video content as simple as possible.

After it took me already so much word to explain this simple model, I better postpone some of the other highlights of our discussion to later posts, e.g. the whole topic of illegal content and the discussion of the Japanese-ness of tagging. Instead, I want to finish this post with a simple, yet for me astonishing fact: Half of the members of this discussion group have installed a second screen next to their main screen to be able to always watch Nico Nico Douga in the background, while they are working on other stuff on their main computer. Don't you think this shows serious commitment?