

Ludic Representations of Suicide Livestreams in the Japanese Videogame NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD

ARTICLE

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that representations of suicide livestreams – webcam broadcasts where the person in front of the camera dies by suicide in front of an internet audience – reveal and openly criticise the various social and political forms at play in their representation. Since the various social frames present in real suicide livestreams also appear in fictional representations of these livestreams, these can be analysed as critiques of their social contexts due to inherently stemming from them. To argue this point, we conducted a close playing of the Japanese videogame *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD*, which contains two scenes depicting suicide livestreams. These ludic representations of suicide livestreams criticise the tropes and stereotypes used to signal abnormality in Japanese popular culture – particularly regarding shut-ins and the wilful dismissal of women’s mental health conditions. While this videogame offers a societal critique on the weaponisation of these tropes, it also prescribes an individualised critique by deterministically representing suicidal behaviour and mental health as problems individuals undergo by not making the right choices. This tension invites players to question their own involvement in the videogame’s events.

Keywords: suicide, livestreams, menhera, hikikomori, video games

Introduction

In this article, we analyse representations of suicide livestreams in the Japanese videogame *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD* (WSS Playground 2022; henceforth, *NSO*) to argue that representations of suicide livestreams reveal and openly criticise the various social and political forms at play in their representation. Although representations are, by necessity, incomplete constructs (Pavel 1986, 106–108),¹ they offer an insight into the implicit values and beliefs of the culture from which they emerged (Greenblatt 1995) by operating as synecdoches where the partial representation assumes the meaning of the represented whole (Burke 1941). For this article, we will argue that *NSO*'s ludic representations of suicide livestreams criticise the tropes and stereotypes used to signal abnormality in Japanese popular culture, particularly surrounding shut-ins – that is, Japan's *hikikomori* problem – and the wilful dismissal of women's mental health conditions (i.e. *menhera*).

The word *hikikomori*² or “shut-in” refers both to the phenomenon of social withdrawal, the essential feature of which is one's physical isolation in one's home for a long period of time (Kawakami and Shimazu 2021, 241; Tajan 2021, xi), and to the person undergoing that isolation (Teo et al. 2014). Although it has sometimes been identified as a Japanese “culture-bound” phenomenon (see Tajan 2021; Teo and Gaw 2010), it can also be found in other countries (Husu and Välimäki 2017; Kawakami and Shimazu 2021, 241; Tajan 2021; Teo et al. 2014). The *hikikomori* phenomenon gradually increased since the 1990s, becoming a recognized social problem in Japan in the early 2000s and a global issue in the 2010s (Tajan 2021, xvi). The behaviour itself is not usually diagnosed as such (Teo et al. 2014). Rather than considering it a mental disorder, contemporary scholarship on *hikikomori* suggests that the behaviour should be considered an idiom of distress – a way to communicate distress and have others recognise it (Tajan 2021, 176).

The term *menhera* (メンヘラ), a portmanteau denoting “mental health-er” (Seko and Kikuchi 2022), was originally Japanese internet slang used by people struggling with mental health issues, but later it gained a negative connotation (Seko and Kikuchi 2021). Within Japanese fiction, this term became a gendered trope consisting of female characters who self-injure – primarily wrist-cutting without clear suicidal intent – as a maladaptive coping strategy (Seko and Kikuchi 2021; 2022). These *menhera* characters are often represented as “mentally vulnerable, attractive, and helpless” (Seko and Kikuchi 2022, 2); a “twisted variant of the damsel in distress, a classic narrative trope in literature that involves young, attractive, and

1 Representations are mediated in various forms. Since media is temporally, physically, or computationally limited, depending on the specific form it takes (see Elleström 2010), fictional or virtual representations of objects, phenomena, persons, events, and so forth cannot be exhaustive and thorough.

2 *Hikikomori* is a shortened form of *shakaiteki hikikomori* (社会的引きこもり), or “social withdrawal”.

helpless mistresses waiting to be rescued by a hero” (Seko and Kikuchi 2021, 364).

While suicide broadcasts are not a new phenomenon (Lester 2015b), their digital counterparts are a part of cybersuicidal behaviour (Starcevic and Aboujaoude 2015) consisting of webcam-enabled broadcasts where the live-streamer intends to die by suicide during the livestream. They have primarily been researched through the lenses of performativity³ (Fratini and Hemer 2020; Lester 2015b) and the role of online witnesses (Artwick 2019; Harris 2015; Li and Jiao 2023; Ma et al. 2016; Phillips and Mann 2019; Polder-Verkiel 2012; Seko 2016). They are a very public form of suicide that relies on a webcam’s framing and affords some degree of audience interaction (Stamenković 2012) because they appear in livestreaming websites (Hamilton et al. 2014). The various social frames present in real suicide livestreams – the suicide itself, the broadcast, the website it is broadcast on, the viewers (both live and posthumous) – also appear in fictional representations of these livestreams. These fictional representations can be analysed as critiques of their social contexts due to inherently stemming from them.

Videogames are cybermedia that can dynamically switch from one state to another (Aarseth and Calleja 2015). They are able to represent suicide livestreams and their accompanying suicidal process, which broadly refers to the increasing seriousness of suicidal behaviour from the onset of death wishes up until either the fading away of the wish to die or the suicidal person’s death by suicide (Wasserman 2016), in a way that demands non-trivial effort and involvement from the player (Aarseth 1997). Accordingly, when a game represents a suicide livestream, the player must be involved in it – and, hence, complicit. However, this complicity is not inherently reprehensible (Sicart 2013). Games have built-in rewards and punishments for successfully experiencing and overcoming their challenges (Sicart 2009, 66). When a player is immersed in the game system, their behaviour becomes subject to the system, its rules, and its mechanics, due to their voluntarily committing to play by the rules to remain engaged in the game (Sicart 2009, 68). Simultaneously, players are also ethical agents capable of morally and ethically evaluating how they behave in the game (Sicart 2009, 74–75). From that perspective, game developers are responsible for the game’s affordances, and the player is (at least partially) responsible for their own behaviour and actions within the game.

It is this tension between developer and player responsibility that has led to a rather long history of moral panics involving videogames and their transgressive depictions of violence or pornography (Bowman 2016; Karlsen 2015). Videogames that assume playful attitudes towards controversial themes – like drug use, self-harm, and suicide – are often criticised by audiences outside of game cultures due to their potential negative effects on players (Linderoth and Mortensen 2015, 4). However, game scholarship has shown that videogames are meaningful tools for emotional,

³ Suicide itself has been considered a performance (Rubenstein 2015), so suicide livestreams might be understood as a dual performance.

moral, and reflective experiences. By touching on transgressive topics like suicide livestreams within the frame of play, games offer a “safe” space to experience them without their real consequences (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). In so doing, they can address the ethical issues implicit in them and provide social commentary through the player’s involvement in the game (Sicart 2009). From this perspective, the representation of suicide livestreams in a videogame provides a fertile ground to reflect on the specific cultural contexts of suicide at play.

NSO’s positionality enables the game to frame constructions of abnormality (in this case, *hikikomori* and *menhera*) in Japan in a straightforward manner that, by virtue of its edge, seem “authentic” despite bordering on satire and parody. Its ludic representations of suicide livestreams lie at the intersection of Japanese popular culture, mental health, and online culture. Japanese videogames are often subject to Orientalist rhetorics by Western audiences and critics for their perceived odd qualities, which are tied to their place of origin (Hutchinson 2019, 24). In reality, they cannot be defined through any essential trait and are instead bound to several local markets and subcultures in Japan that fluctuate under the influence of industrial structures and interpretative communities (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, 3).⁴

NSO is both bound to *bishōjo* (美少女; “beautiful girl”) and *shōjo* (少女; “girl”) genres (Berndt et al. 2019; Galbraith 2019) and also nested in Japanese *dōjin* (同人) and (Western) indie game (i.e. *independent* game) productions.⁵ As a game rooted in *dōjin* culture where videogames tend to showcase taboo subjects and usually contain attractive *bishōjo* characters (Grau de Pablos 2024), *NSO*’s depiction of suicide livestreams and the mental health of a girl in a cute visual style strongly signals that the game was made for those audiences familiar with the *bishōjo* and *shōjo* subcultures. At the same time, while *dōjin* videogames are originally made by enthusiasts of *anime*, *manga*, and *videogame* subcultures in *otaku*⁶ spaces like Comiket, *NSO* is published on mainstream videogame distribution platforms like Steam for PCs, the Nintendo eShop for Nintendo Switch consoles, and the PlayStation Store for Sony PlayStation consoles, like many Western indie videogames.

As a Japanese indie game, *NSO* was made in Japan by a professional Japanese developer team with (relative) financial and artistic independence from the large studios and corporations within the field of videogame development (see Keogh 2023). Independent videogames compete for players in similar markets as big-budget videogames, so they often mark themselves apart through styles of play that are trans-

4 Japanese videogames belong to a large media ecosystem in Japan, known as the *media mix*, which can be understood as a set of marketing strategies that distribute its content across several media channels, mostly via *anime* (animation series and films), *manga* (comics), and videogames, in which there is a focus on the proliferation of fictional characters (Steinberg 2012).

5 The difference between Japanese *dōjin* videogames and Western independent videogames is muddy at best. For ease of understanding, it can be said that *dōjin* videogames are products derived from fan activities, whereas indie videogames differ from normative big-budget game production models and have some financial independence (Grau de Pablos 2024; Juul 2019).

6 *Otaku* (おたく) are male fans of *anime*, *manga*, and videogames.

parently gamic, with visual styles that tend to hearken back to older videogames or art styles, or by containing weird and at times “edgy” stories. These features aim to differentiate independent videogames as being more “authentic” than big-budget commercial videogames (Juul 2019). The edgy story is present in *NSO*’s depiction of the struggles of a young woman, and its explicit suicide scenes set it apart from big-budget commercial videogames that often only represent suicide in an indirect or unserious manner, such as by presenting suicide as a humorous or ironic subject, using cartoony graphics, hiding human characters involved in the act, or hiding the moment of death (Juul 2013, 97–103).

By conducting a close playing of the two scenes depicting suicide livestreams in *NSO*, we argue that the game offers both individualistic and societal critiques of the tropes and stereotypes used to signal abnormality in Japanese popular culture – particularly regarding *hikikomori* and *menhera*. On the one hand, the game’s representation of the suicidal process is explicitly individualistic, framing the protagonist’s worsening mental state as a personal shortcoming. On the other hand, by virtue of encoding a (fictional) societal response, the game criticises Japanese sociocultural constraints, particularly those surrounding the social shame of (perceived) failure and the wilful dismissal of women’s mental health conditions as attention-seeking behaviour. Both representations suggest that these constraints are eminently visible and harmful enough to play a part in suicidal behaviours. This duality manifests itself through the player, whose responsibility for the protagonist’s suicide produces a potential space for moral, emotional, and ethical reflections on societal issues through the represented suicide livestream.

We argue that the reasons for the protagonist’s suicide are overwhelmingly societal, cultural, and political, rather than exclusively pathological, and assume the Critical Suicidologist position that suicide and suicidal behaviours are “deeply embedded in particular social, political, ethical, and historical contexts” (White et al. 2016, 1). This position exists in contrast to mainstream suicidology’s assumption of suicide as the result of individual pathology (Marsh 2016). In practical terms, we will not approach our analysis of the suicide livestreams through the lens of a (fictional) psychological autopsy (Hjelmeland et al. 2012; Hjelmeland 2016). Rather, our analysis is informed by a psychopolitical approach, which aims “to make visible the relationship between the experiences of distress and suicidality and socially situated forces and logic” (Marsh 2020, 551). We do want to note, however, that the game is deeply embedded in Japanese political, cultural, societal, and ideological discourses about *hikikomori* and *menhera*. These discourses deal with a perceived abnormality: their tropes and stereotypes draw from various psychological explanations, which are also represented in the game. As such, we show how the game presents its protagonist’s psychological state to criticise the societal tropes of *hikikomori* and *menhera*.

Methodology

We conducted a close playing⁷ of *NSO* informed by New Historicism (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000) and New Formalism (Levine 2015). “Close playings” are a self-aware and critical way of playing games, informed both by the playstyles assumed by researchers – which we detail below – and by corollary research relevant to the game (Aarseth 2003). While New Historicism regards the culture surrounding a work as an extension of the text to be interpreted, New Formalism dissolves the gap between the formal structure of the work (i.e. its literary techniques, material shape, paratexts) and its content (i.e. the story and the sociopolitical conditions represented in it) to consider the forms (i.e. the organising principles) that create and express the meanings of a work. For this article, then, we analyse the representations of suicide livestreams in *NSO* through the lens of the specific sociopolitical context of late-2010s and early-2020s Japanese online culture. The in-game representations of suicide livestreams are marked by a series of organising principles related to simulated in-game days, social frameworks in the form of livestreams, and represented hierarchies of gender and mental health that seem to mimic their real-life counterparts.

As the second author has written elsewhere (Blom 2023), games are textual phenomena where players have – and must use – their in-game agency to change what they see and experience, which affects their interpretation of the text. Thus, games are not fully realised until players engage with their content (Aarseth 2007b; Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Although our analysis will mention a “player”, we do not refer to ourselves or to a real, empirical person playing the game. Instead, we refer to an implied player, “a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to ‘exercise its effect’” (Aarseth 2007b).⁸ Since *NSO* is a game with a non-linear, branching narrative structure, *NSO*’s implied player must make a specific set of choices to experience the narrative branches ending with the suicide livestreams. Each choice realizes a different story and, subsequently, set of story endings in the game, effectively creating a different version of each character involved (Blom 2023).

Assuming this perspective, both of us played through *NSO* multiple times to familiarise ourselves with its themes, style, and systems. These playthroughs focused on getting to know the videogame, so we played it according to our own play styles, testing the limits of its systems while taking notes. The first author played with the specific intent of reaching the two endings featuring suicide livestreams that we discuss in this article. The first author consulted an online guide stating the conditions that trigger these two endings, but which does not provide a step-by-step guide or a description of what happens in any playthrough (cheryl’s bong 2023), and tailored

⁷ Textual approaches to the study of games are common in the field of Game Studies, and are originally derived from Literary Studies (e.g. Fiorilli 2022; Ford and Blom 2025; Hutchinson 2021; Meinen 2023; Smith 2024).

⁸ This implied player derives from the implied reader, a literary structure constructed by a text that “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect” (Iser 1978, 34).

their playstyle accordingly. They took notes and made screenshots and recordings to capture significant moments and most lines of dialogue of these endings. Afterwards, the first author played through the game both experimentally and with the same guide, finishing all other endings to unlock the final ending, which we discuss near the end of the paper.

How NEEDED STREAMER OVERLOAD works

NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD is a narrative-based videogame with multiple endings where the player must help Ame make a career in streaming: helping her “become the biggest streamer in the world” is done by getting “at least one million fans to satisfy [her] desperate need for approval” over 30 in-game days. Ame is a young woman who, in her own words, has trouble getting out of bed in the morning, does not want to go out, does not want to get a proper job, is scared of other people, and is pissed off by adults. The player is cast in the role of P-chan,⁹ a blank character who serves as both lover and producer to the videogame’s protagonist. The player helps Ame achieve her goal by managing both her streaming career – under her alias OMGkawaiiAngel, or KAngel, for short – and her daily life. Her career and mental state are represented numerically: apart from her number of followers, the game keeps track of Ame’s Stress, Affection (towards the player), and Mental Darkness (a numerical representation of how Ame is “doing mentally” and of “how well [she copes] with reality”, according to its in-game description). These numbers increase or decrease by doing different activities, which can be selected throughout the in-game days, divided into noon, dusk, and evening through the game’s interface, a virtual computer’s operating system that resembles an amalgam of Windows XP and Windows 98 (Figure 1). The player can do one activity during each part of the day, except for streaming, which is only available during the evening. In total, the player can do three activities per day to change the numbers.

9 The meaning of the letter “P” in P-chan’s name is never clarified in detail. As such, it is open to players’ interpretation. It could be a play on Player, Producer, Pet (P-chan is often represented in the game’s promotional material as a pink cat with a sad face), Papa, Perfect (in the beginning of the game, Ame explains that the player is called P-chan “coz [the player is] so Perfect for [her]”), among others. In the Japanese context, the suffix *-chan* is an honorific often used to refer to younger women but also used in situations that denote intimate relationships, like lovers or close friends (regardless of gender); it can also refer to pets. The ambiguity surrounding P-chan contributes to the game’s potential for multilayered interpretation.



Figure 1. The main user interface of *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD*. This and subsequent screenshots were taken by the first author on the Nintendo Switch version of the game.

These activities offer various degrees of specificity. While the player can make Ame go out somewhere, for example, it is abstract in its representation of going outside, giving the player the choice only of which district of Tokyo to visit. The activities for staying indoors offer a higher degree of specificity, like playing videogames, having sex, spending time together, doing drugs, or browsing the internet. These last two, however, offer the most specificity, giving players the choice of what drugs to take and which websites to visit and behaviours to do in them, respectively. In the PC version of the game, the player can make Ame take “depaz” (a fictional version of Depas, anxiety medicine), “dylsem” (Delsym, cough medicine), “embian” (Ambien, sleeping medicine), “magic grass” (cannabis), or “magic paper” (LSD).¹⁰ When choosing to browse the internet, the player can make Ame use social media, look herself up to see what others are saying about her, watch something on a streaming service, go to “/st/” (the in-game equivalent to anonymous imageboards like 4chan, 2chan, or Ylilauta), or use “Dinder” (Tinder).

In addition to these activities, Ame’s mental state is also affected through her communication with the player. Throughout the in-game days, Ame communicates with the player via a simulated instant messaging app, JINE (a parody of the Japanese instant-messaging app LINE). She texts the player at the start of every section of the day, after every activity, and on special occasions determined by the combination of her mental state and the activities the player has made her do. On most occasions, the player can only respond with emojis, the choice of which does not affect Ame

¹⁰ The Nintendo Switch and PlayStation versions of the game change the drugs to “magicals”, which are candies and pastries, likely as a result of stricter guidelines on representations of drug use on these platforms. They have the same effect in the game, however.

except when the player does not reply. During special events, however, the player is given a choice between specific lines of dialogue, and their choice of what to answer may increase or decrease various numbers in Ame's mental state.

When Ame streams in the evening, the player must pick a topic or theme for the stream, including topics like "Chat & Chill", "Letsplay", "KAngel Tries Stuff", and "Break-down Stream", most of which are based on content on streaming and gaming platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and the Japanese Niko Niko Dōga. After a short cutscene where Ame puts on her streaming outfit, she goes live (Figure 2). The game presents an interface resembling YouTube and Twitch livestreams, with a simulated internet browser window displaying a rectangle video of KAngel talking, the title of the stream underneath it, and a chat window to the right showing responses to KAngel's stream (Figure 3). During her livestreams, KAngel does something related to the topic at hand: talking about a specific topic, playing a videogame, or engaging with a prop – a bouncy ball, an ice cream popsicle, a figure of herself. While the player can choose the topic, their control over the stream is limited to deleting hurtful comments, which can lower Ame's Stress, and choosing two comments for KAngel to read and respond to at the end of the stream.

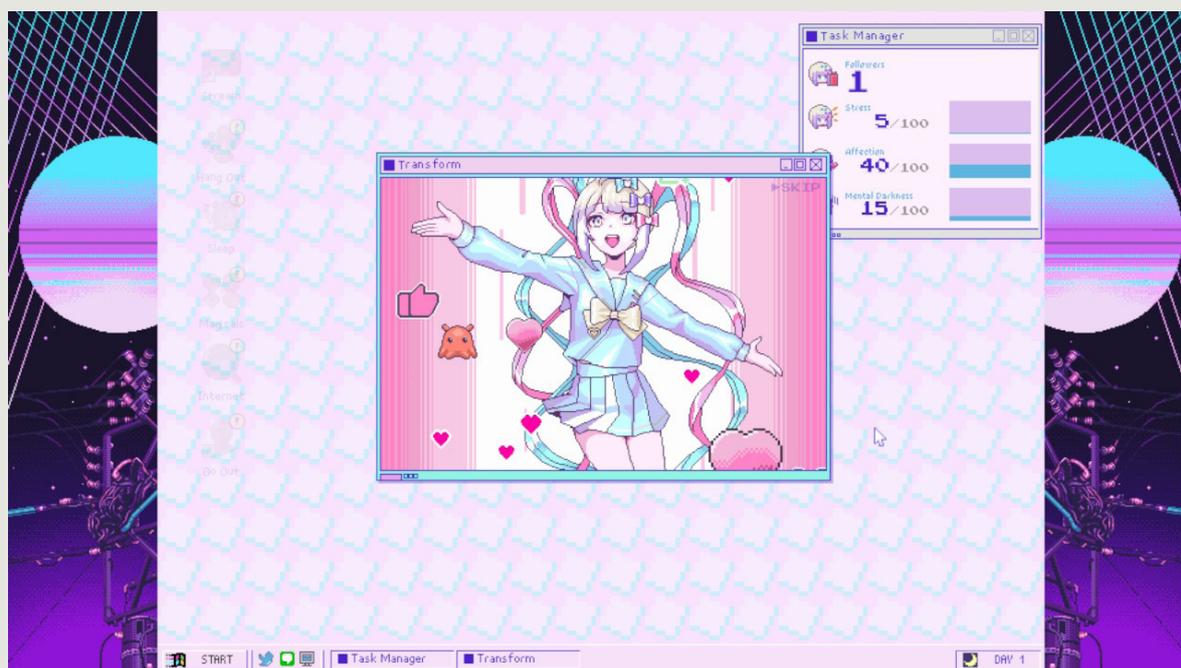


Figure 2. A still frame of Ame's transformation sequence into KAngel.

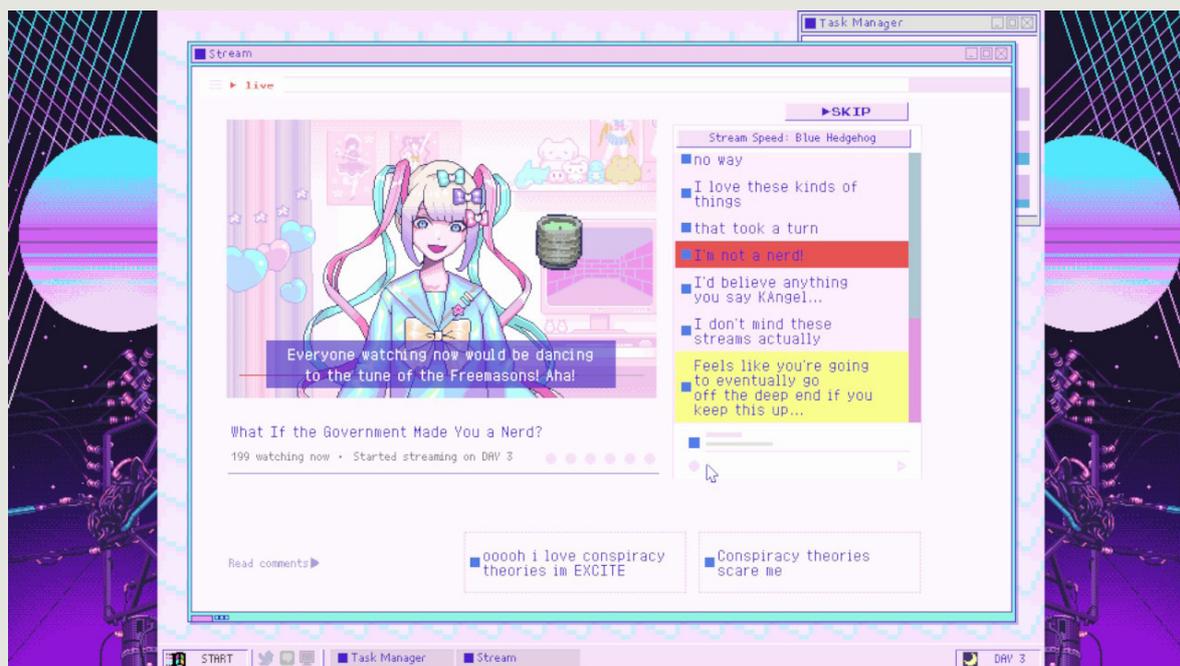


Figure 3. A still frame of one of KAngel's streams. Notice the viewers' comments on the right.

The process of playing the game mostly consists of balancing Ame's mental state, as letting the numbers get too high or too low can end the game. Players can encounter almost thirty different endings depending on the specific combinations of numbers in Ame's mental state, the in-game days that have transpired, the activities the player made her do, and the number of followers she has. Each ending serves as a conclusion to a branching narrative as a result of the player's actions. *NSO* invites players to reach all the different endings, providing a simple checklist showing which endings have been achieved and how many are still missing, as well as by locking a final ending – called “Comment Te Dire Adieu” – that only becomes accessible after seeing all the other endings. Players of *NSO* – who are likely familiar with other multi-ending adventure games like *NSO* – interpret the checklist as an invitation to see all the endings, because they can read the intent of an implied designer in it (Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni 2020). In the process of achieving all the endings, players will need to play through two endings where Ame livestreams her death by suicide: “There Are No Angels” and “Dark Angel”.

“There Are No Angels” and hikikomori tropes

The “There Are No Angels” ending is a direct embodiment of *hikikomori* tropes. In this ending, the suicide livestream is very short. After Ame dons her KAngel outfit, she immediately starts her stream, titled “Farewell Stream”. Unlike her previous streams at home, she is outside. The Tokyo skyline extends behind her, and the wind blows in the background. She is standing on the roof of a building, looking at her camera. As soon as the stream starts, she says: “Well... I guess this is it. Goodbye.” As the chat window shows her fans' concern (Figure 4), the camera shifts up to frame a television

antenna and the blue sky. A thud sounds – she jumped off the building. A window labelled “the end” pops up, with the following text: “Love and online numbers are her coping mechanisms.” Game over. Of the 27 possible endings in the game, this is one of the few that requires failing Ame’s goal of a million followers. This failure, mixed with Ame’s perturbed and unloved state, encode her status as a *hikikomori*.

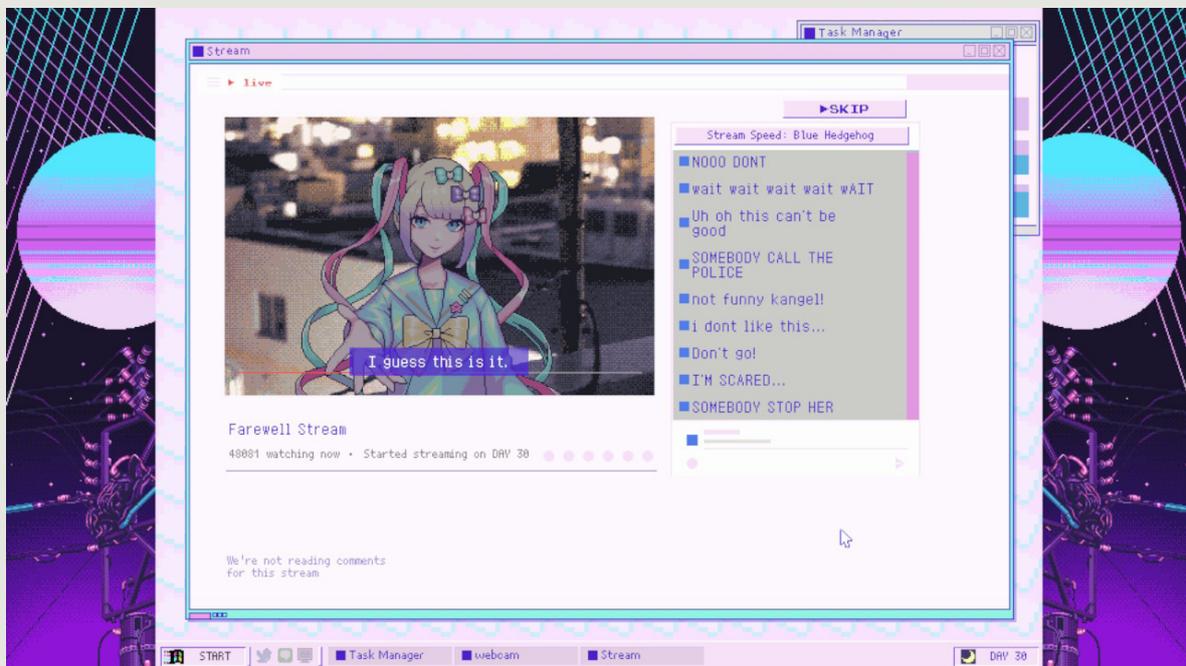


Figure 4. KAngel about to jump off the roof. Notice her viewers’ responses.

Because socially withdrawn behaviour is seen as aberrant, *hikikomori* are stigmatized through stereotypes. They are often portrayed as *otaku*, male fans of *anime*, *manga*, and videogames, who spend their time almost exclusively consuming nerdy media (Berman and Rizzo 2019; Kinsella 1998, 290; Saitō 2013; Whaley 2023, 104–105), or as mentally ill internet addicts who never leave their rooms (Tajan 2021). The *hikikomori* phenomenon is discursively framed as an individual problem through notions of “failure” and “refusal” to participate in society; this is often due to its connection to mental illness.¹¹ This framing is reinforced through the weaponised use of the label “NEET” (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) within the pop culture imaginary (Berman and Rizzo 2019). These stereotypes are not entirely accurate: *hikikomori* do leave their room on occasion and the time they spend on hobbies, including internet use, broadly matches that of their non-*hikikomori* peers; while they are hospitalised for mental illness more often than their peers, this is likely a result of their isolation rather than an underlying cause of it. Notably, although the connection to *otaku* implies that *hikikomori* are stereotypically men, a minority of them are women (Tajan 2021, 111).

¹¹ The phenomenon is strongly associated with autism and ADHD, although not all cases can be explained through neurodivergence (Kawakami and Shimazu 2021, 241).

Ame is one of those women. At the start of the game, Ame is unquestionably a NEET: she is a high-school dropout, she is not employed, and she is unwilling to get a job. She has P-chan (i.e. the player), but she seems to have no friends, and she does not go out much. She is a fan of nerdy media, embodying various *anime* and *manga* tropes through her KAngel persona. She is addicted to the internet, as seen in the game's interface: her image on-screen is permanently framed in a "webcam" window, she only communicates with the player via internet instant messaging, her daily activities are all icons on a computer desktop; and her entire life is mediated through a computer screen, as if she herself were an internet-enabled piece of software. At the very start of the game, before the player has any chance to change anything, Ame is already an amalgam of common *hikikomori* tropes (save for her gender, which we will explain in the following subsection on the "Dark Angel" ending). As Berman and Rizzo (2019) note, much of the discursive framing of *hikikomori* is centred on notions of "failure" and "refusal", and while Ame thoroughly embodies a "refusal" to conform to normative social expectations, her being framed as a "failure" is an open question at the start of the game. Indeed, Ame's desire to be a famous streamer with one million followers signals a desire to succeed while still refusing to engage in normative society.

To see the "There Are No Angels" ending, players must reach the final day of the game with less than half a million followers, a low number in Ame's Affection towards the player, and a high number in her Mental Darkness. Through the process of playing the game, the player must make Ame replicate *hikikomori* tropes: not going out, as doing so raises Affection and reduces Mental Darkness; going online often, which raises Mental Darkness and Stress; watching series and movies, which reduces Stress;¹² and, crucially, streaming as little as possible. In making Ame fully embody the stereotypical *hikikomori* lifestyle, the player functionally sabotages her dreams. Ame calls the player out for this sabotage in a series of text messages before the final in-game day:

ahaha no one online gives a shit about me... not surprising considering what im like i guess

i shouldve known that my dream was too farfetched. reality is always so unforgiving

i dont want to blame someone else for my problems but I trusted you, you know... did you really have my best interests at heart?

i feel like i dont even know you anymore

it only takes an instant for someones love and dreams to be shattered, huh...

Despite these texts, the game keeps going. If the player commits to achieving the

¹² Since some endings occur when Ame's Stress, Mental Darkness, and Affection climb up too fast, it is necessary to manage them in order to avoid that.

“There Are No Angels” ending, Ame will text them the following messages on the final day of the game:

our 30 days is up

everything i did was kinda forgettable, huh...

aha. i feel kinda tired...

we did our best but i didnt get many followers

all i did was get hurt over and over again. i dont think i can do this anymore

ahaha.....

The messages express her disappointment at not achieving her goal. “i feel kinda tired” and “i dont think i can do this anymore” may be read as expressions of resignation, but the suicide livestream that follows briefly thereafter reveals their underlying suicidal intent. After these messages, which Ame sends at noon on the 30th day, time skips forward to “way too late”. At this point, Ame texts the following:

hey p-chan, lets start my final stream

as my last goodbye, i want to do a stream that no one will ever see coming

i want lots of people to come and see me, just as i had dreamed of once upon a time

we’ll be together forever... right, p-chan?

These messages reveal Ame’s – and, indeed, the game’s – assumptions about what suicide livestreams do: because Ame phrases them as streams that “no one will ever see coming”, the game treats them as memorable. Likewise, as Ame mentions that they attract “lots of people to come and see [them]”, the game plays into the trend of suicide livestreams being recirculated as shock material, whether live or posthumously (Alvarez 2017; Fratini and Hemer 2020; Stamenković 2012). Ame is using her suicide livestream to communicate her desire for fame – and, by extension, digital immortality – in a way that a private suicide could not.

Ame’s choice of method, although highly lethal, intentionally hides her death: the camera remains after she jumps (Figure 5). It is worth noting that the method of death in public and broadcasted suicides tends to reveal the intent behind them, with messier, more graphically violent methods often betraying an intent to hurt the audience by traumatising them (see Lester 2015a, 155; 2015b). Ame’s choice of method, jumping off a high place while leaving the camera behind, perhaps signals a desire not to traumatise her audience by hiding the moment of death. It seems that Ame uses this livestream to achieve her dream of fame despite the player’s sabotage.

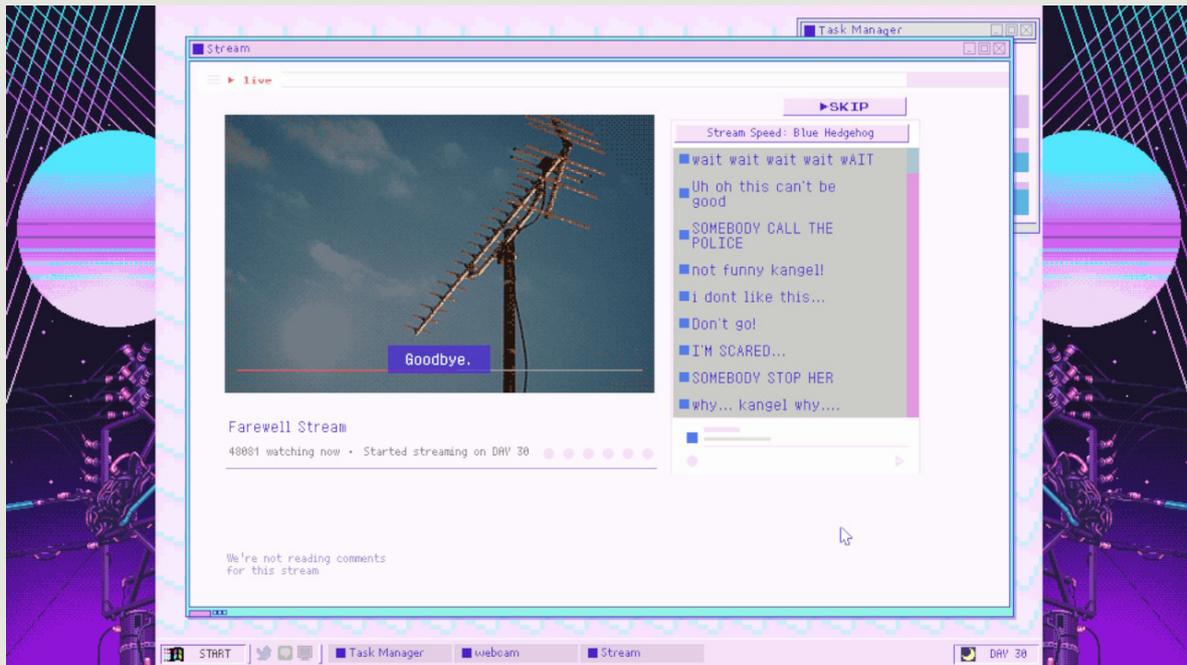


Figure 5. KAngel's suicide livestream hiding the moment of death, showing an antenna instead of the skyline or her body.

This ending encodes a warning about the *hikikomori* lifestyle: given the abandonment necessary to achieve this ending, Ame is truly alone. The player, who is the driving force behind Ame's actions, is either unable or unwilling to make her dreams come true while being all too willing to let her hurt herself. This enabled refusal and forced failure are themselves reminiscent of stereotypes explaining *hikikomori* through codependent relationships between a mother and child, where mothers enable their *hikikomori* children by coddling them (Berman & Rizzo 2019, 800–801). In this ending, the player embodies this codependent role as Ame's partner and producer, ignoring the multiple signs of Ame's distress that eventually lead to her suicide. The ending simultaneously frames the *hikikomori* phenomenon as the "failure" and "refusal" – to echo the stereotypical construction of the phenomenon – of both *hikikomori* individuals and their enablers as an individual and familial shortcoming reliant on wider societal conceptions of what "success" is meant to look like.

"Dark Angel" and menhera tropes

The "Dark Angel" ending embodies the fictional tropes of the *menhera* figure. As part of Ame's worsening mental state, Ame alters her KAngel persona, dropping the cheerful act and replacing it with an angry and depressed attitude, visually signalled by a change from her pastel-coloured cyan and pink outfit into a black and crimson outfit. In her final livestream, which is framed as a stream celebrating one million followers, she berates her followers for the hateful comments she has received online. The chat members play along as if it was a joke, but the reality of KAngel's words materialises as she lifts her sleeve, revealing self-harm wounds. As she does

so, she asks, “How do I make you all taste your own medicine? How do I make you all hurt like I have?” Moments later, she pulls out a box cutter, says “I’ll make you all taste true pain”, and slits her neck as a pink stain splatters on the screen (Figure 6). Game over.

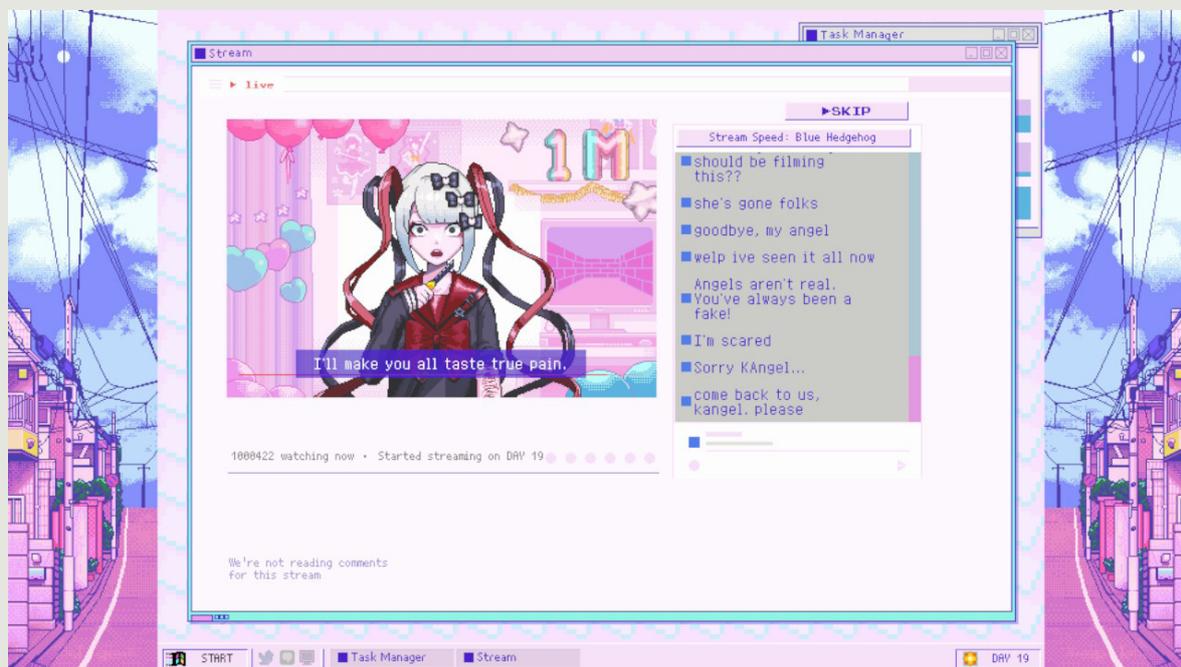


Figure 6. Ame, as Dark Angel, about to slit her throat.

To achieve this ending, players must reach Ame’s goal of one million followers while keeping her Stress at the maximum level. The “Dark Angel” ending requires the Stress bar to increase to 120 by consistently keeping Ame close to the limit.¹³ The process to achieve this ending requires pushing Ame to work as hard as possible, stream every night, make posts online every day, and relax as little as possible. Given the risk of accidentally reaching other endings by making her Stress too high too fast,¹⁴ the player must make sure that she reaches one million followers before reaching her maximum level of Stress. Contrary to the “There Are No Angels” ending, where the player broadly enabled Ame, the “Dark Angel” ending demands micromanaging Ame’s work life so she can be as successful as possible by ignoring everything else in her life. If the player’s behaviour in “There Are No Angels” could be classified as sabotage, the player’s behaviour in “Dark Angel” seems to be explicit destruction under the guise of concern for her career.

There are four livestreams that define the “Dark Angel” ending, titled “An Important Message”, “a”, “The Internet Angel”, and an untitled final stream, and they consist of multiple layers of quasi- and directly suicidal communication. The first livestream occurs after Ame spends a couple days close to maximum Stress. As the day starts,

13 The three statistics that keep track of Ame’s mental state (Stress, Affection, and Mental Darkness) have a normal limit of 100.

14 Reaching the limit of any of the statistics too fast usually results in an ending.

the wallpaper of the simulated computer turns red, and a new window labelled “Self-Destruct” appears on the screen, showing a vertical, skin-coloured rectangle – Ame’s arm – on top of a blue background. A pink bar moves up and down the rectangle. If the player clicks or presses a button on their controller, an orange line – a wrist cut – appears in the place where the bar was when they clicked (see Figure 7 below). The player must help Ame cut herself multiple times before the minigame ends. There is no way to avoid cutting her wrists once this sequence starts, and the game will not progress unless the player helps her cut.



Figure 7. The self-cutting minigame.

After the player cuts her, the game forces a livestream where Ame explains that “some girls just can’t help but cut themselves into the night” for attention, as a cry for help, or because they feel apathetic. Notably, she refuses to use the first person, using the vague “some girls” or the generic “you” as a substitute. So, she says that “girls” cut themselves because “all you want to do is disappear. And you’re unable to forgive yourself for living such a horrid and ugly existence.” Most of her chat members seem to pick up on her evasive way of talking about herself, with some of them sending supportive messages and others treating the stream as a joke, saying, “what are you mentally ill lol”, “this is just how she is sometimes”, or “i take screenshots of kangel whenever she gets depressed like this and put them all in a folder”. As Seko (2016) noted, there is a gap between live-streamers’ and viewers’ perceptions of what livestreams are, with viewers engaging with online content mediated by a webcam as a source of entertainment, rather than as earnest communication (Seko 2016, 178) or, in Ame’s case, as a thinly veiled cry for help. She ends her stream by noting,

I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you see someone who’s hurt, please be nice to them. To be kind is to understand. So please take the time to understand others. Be someone who can save a life.

Framing the livestream as a public service announcement that brings awareness to self-cutting, rather than as an explicit cry for help, means Ame gets to save face while expressing her distress (Owen et al. 2012). However, while her use of the generic “you” allows her to address her audience and tell them to be more mindful about how they treat others (or, rather, her), it serves the double purpose of addressing the player. After all, Ame’s wrist cuts were carved by the player in spots of the player’s choice at a pace the player chose. The line “be someone who can save a life” is aimed at her fans, who cyberbully her and treat her distress as a joke, just as much as it is aimed at the player who treats her distress as a necessary part of achieving the “Dark Angel” ending.

This distress taints her achievement of reaching a million followers. After multiple breakdowns, the player unlocks an altered version of the livestream celebrating one million followers.¹⁵ While previous celebration livestreams have been positive, focusing on Ame’s being thankful to her followers, this final livestream reverses her approach: Ame drops her previous KAngel persona, going from a bubbly “promise of future peace”, who is “a little manic and moody”, to “a wave of darkness, enveloping the abysmal internet” who is “trapped by [her] past traumas” and “dead inside”. Her outfit, previously a pastel cyan and pink, changes to black and crimson red (see Figure 8 below). She starts the livestreams by sarcastically thanking her followers before going on to berate them for cyberbullying her, noting that she “didn’t work [herself] to the bone for this shit” and that her followers have “forgotten that others feel pain too”. She ends her stream with a threat: “You’re all going to get what you deserve one day.” Unlike the “There Are No Angels” ending, where the moment of death was only implicit, Ame’s goal in doing this suicide livestream is to directly hurt her audience by capturing her death on camera. The choice of a slit throat is graphic and done with the full intent to traumatise her cyberbullies (Lester 2015a; 2015b).

¹⁵ Throughout the game, the player can unlock special livestreams to celebrate follower milestones: ten thousand, one hundred thousand, two hundred and fifty thousand, five hundred thousand, and one million. Every celebration livestream can only be unlocked after the previous one has been streamed.



Figure 8. A still frame of Ame's transformation sequence into Dark Angel.

Part of the reason Ame chooses to die by suicide is the cyberbullying her fans put her through. The justification for this behaviour is that Ame's fans were engaging with what they assumed was a performance for entertainment (Seko 2016) by joking along, even in moments where Ame seemed to be in explicit, unquestionable distress. Fans assumed that this distress could not possibly be serious until the reveal of Ame's self-harm wounds made it unquestionable (Kilby 2001). What we find in this behaviour is an echo of *menhera* tropes, where the label *menhera* is used derogatively to refer to "attention seekers" (Seko and Kikuchi 2022) or women pretending to be mentally ill to get validation.¹⁶ The notion of being labelled a *menhera*, then, already implies an assumption of performativity, and that distress should not be taken seriously until it escalates to self-inflicted physical violence.

The other factor in Ame's suicide is the player's complicity in her distress. Since the player is responsible for pushing her to work as much as possible, for cutting her, and for making her do her final livestream, Ame's agency is intrinsically limited; she has no clear control over her own life. All her goals are delegated to P-chan, a player stand-in whose interest in seeing the "Dark Angel" ending somewhat sadistically pushes Ame to her death. Thus, unlike the "There Are No Angels" ending, which focused its critique inwards to Ame's behaviours, the "Dark Angel" ending aims its critique outwards, towards the dismissal of women's distress as merely attention-seeking behaviour, by suggesting that this dismissal eventually reaches a violent breaking point which makes dismissal impossible. Likewise, the connection between cyberbullying and suicide in the game seems to draw from a discursive demonisation of the internet in Japan for the real connection between these phenomena (Alvarez 2018).

¹⁶ Ame's suicide further stigmatises her as a mad and feminine Other (Kosonen 2015).

"Comment Te Dire Adieu": Player responsibility in NSO

Up to this point, we have been showing that the player is not just a passive observer to the events unfolding on their screen, but an active participant in Ame's demise. The final ending of the game, which we frame as the "true" ending, sheds some light on how responsible the player really is. This ending, called "Comment Te Dire Adieu" ("How to Say Farewell to You"), unlocks after the player has seen all the other endings. As the player is taken to select one of their save files, a new file appears. If the player selects it, the game starts with a text from Ame, who says, "watch me closely, p-chan". After that, the game proceeds without any input from the player. Ame streams, posts online, goes outside, does drugs, plays videogames, and watches movies, all by herself. As the player watches, Ame occasionally texts the player, pointing out how well she is doing as she realises that she does not need the player to live her life. When she says her final goodbye to the player on day 30, she leaves a note on the computer's desktop. This note has been on her desktop throughout the entire game but attempting to open it would have only resulted in the webcam window covering it up. When the player opens it in the true ending, the note reveals that P-chan is not a person within the game's diegetic world but a fictional character inside that world, which Ame created for mental and emotional support, and who tells her what to do.

While Ame's note shifts responsibility from P-chan to Ame, it does not shift responsibility from the player to Ame; the player is still responsible for leading Ame to the endings where she dies by suicide. As the player engages with the game by managing Ame's life through numerical representations of her mental and emotional state, making her do specific things which lead to different endings, we can assert that the player is responsible for Ame's death. Indeed, this responsibility is echoed in both of Ame's livestreamed suicides. Her lines during those livestreams, which are nominally used to address her fictional audience, also serve to address the player. When she says, "Well... I guess this is it. Goodbye" in the "There Are No Angels" ending and: "I'll make you all taste true pain" in the "Dark Angel" ending, the player is part of the group being addressed, calling attention to the player's role in her death.

The fact that both livestreams start without the player's direct input also suggests a transfer of agency from the player to Ame, which goes beyond starting the streams: her suicide is itself framed as an act of freedom. Both of her suicide livestreams are precipitated by factors external to Ame, namely, the pressure to succeed, and the cyberbullying and mockery she was exposed to because of her visible struggles with mental health. Jaworski (2015) has argued that suicide can be understood as a form of freedom, particularly as freedom from (mis)representation, and that the desire for suicide is freeing because it can affirm the agency and identity of someone whose subjectivity feels disavowed. This struggle against external misrepresentations is present in both of Ame's suicide livestreams. Ame aims to correct an external misrepresentation of herself as a streamer who could not attract a large enough audience, and as someone who fakes mental distress to receive attention. She does

this through livestreams that she assumes will attract an audience, no matter if it is live or posthumous, and by exposing her self-harm wounds in front of her audience – thereby making dismissal impossible – and trying to traumatise her cyberbullies through a messy and graphic suicide. In showing that suicide is a way to correct these misrepresentations, the game critiques the social dynamics behind them. It suggests that the social constraints that impose these misrepresentations through harmful societal tropes can play a part in suicidal behaviour.

While the player is an explicit part of these representations through their direct control over Ame, this responsibility does not seem to be accompanied by accountability. The reveal that P-chan is not real within the diegetic world shifts much of the player's accountability onto Ame. This shift, we argue, defangs the game's potential for societal critique. Rather than critiquing issues surrounding the societal response to mental illness embedded in *menhera* tropes and *hikikomori* stereotypes, the game suggests that Ame is stuck within these lifestyles by her own choice, and that her lack of agency over her own life is not only her own fault but also completely intentional.

By showing Ame's independence from the player in this final ending, the game turns inwards its potential critique on *hikikomori* and *menhera* as societal problems; it thus reframes the problems of *hikikomori* and the distress caused by societal responses to mental illness towards the individual. This individualist critique is broadly aligned with the more derogative aspects of both *hikikomori* and *menhera* tropes: that isolation is caused through an individual's choice and perpetuated by enablers – that is, the player (Berman and Rizzo 2019) – and that the debilitating aspects of mental illness are performances put on by attention seekers who seek validation, for example, from the player (Seko and Kikuchi 2022). These representations rather simplistically suggest that these are not societal issues that require radical, large-scale intervention but individual shortcomings which can be overcome through effort and determination.

Conclusion

Death is present in games and assumes a variety of forms and meanings (see Flynn-Jones 2015; Klastруп 2007; Maycock 2025; McAllister and Ruggill 2018; Robles 2012; Wenz 2023). In general, however, the death of a game's protagonist is a commonplace trope to signify failure, to the point that its near-ubiquitous presence is unquestioned (Ntelia 2015; Tocci 2008). However, suicide in large, commercial videogames is mostly represented indirectly (Juul 2013, 99–103). While we cannot provide any conclusive evidence why that might be, we may assume that it is in response to various controversies around videogame depictions of violence (Bowman 2015; Karlsen 2015) and corollary concerns that depictions of suicide in a videogame trivialise suicide (Dunlap and Kowert 2025; Nagenborg and Hoffstadt 2009; López Pérez 2024). Indeed, there is a certain reluctance – even in *NSO* – to give the player direct control over the act of suicide itself (Juul 2013, 103).

NSO partly subverts this reluctance by giving the player control over Ame's suicidal process, either exacerbating or alleviating it, depending on their playstyle. While this amount of control over a character's wellbeing is rather powerful, its critique of both the *hikikomori* issue and the *menhera* stigma can only be individualistic. Since Ame's mental state is tracked numerically, and it changes by specific and predictable amounts based on the player's actions, it reduces distress to deterministic numbers. It suggests that a person undergoing a state of *hikikomori* or the stigma of being labelled a *menhera* should undertake the actions necessary for their "bars" and "numbers" to drop to socially acceptable levels, since high numbers of stress and mental darkness lead to suicide. As this incomplete representation (Pavel 1986, 107–108) concentrates meaning within it (Burke 1941), it reduces rather complicated mental health issues to manageable numbers.

Even though the simplification ostensibly stigmatises the *hikikomori* condition and further replicates harmful tropes of *menhera*, we do not want to condemn *NSO* for these. While its simplification of the suicidal process to a numerically measurable metric is problematic because it is transparently – almost excessively – gamified (Juul 2019), this simplification is a common feature of ludic systems. Any process adapted into a ludic mechanical system will involve a series of simplifications to turn them into dynamic models that can be acted upon (Aarseth 2006, 848; 2007a). As any other ludic simplification of the suicidal process would have offered similarly problematic simulations, we withhold judgment on *NSO*. Wholesale disavowal of this game, steeped as it is in its Japanese cultural context, can perpetuate Orientalist discourses seen in other Japanese cultural exports by marking them as uniquely weird, odd, or questionable (Hutchinson 2019, 23–29). While some aspects of it are, of course, questionable, complete disavowal seems to be an exaggerated response. Thus, we do not wish to contribute to discussions on moral panics about entertainment media.

Instead, it is more fruitful to consider that the tension between *NSO*'s game system and its depiction (written text and images) suggests a wider societal critique on stereotypes and tropes surrounding shut-ins and women's mental health conditions – both of which are signs of distress interpreted as abnormal. This tension comes to a climax in the game's suicide livestreams, which make these problems readable by implementing a simulation of the suicidal process – a crucial part of suicide livestreams that is often hidden from the audience. Thus, the ludic representations of suicide livestreams are used to critique their societal contexts through a combination of textual and audiovisual features, and their demand for player involvement in them makes players complicit, prompting them to think about what the ethics of their actions are.

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