

“THE SOUL ON STRIKE THAT STRIKES THROUGH AFFECT”: ALTERNATIVE
LIFESTYLES, OLD ANXIETIES, AND NEW BEGINNINGS IN *WELCOME TO THE N.H.K.*

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ABSTRACT

My project paper examines the Japanese social types of the hikikomori and the otaku within the anime series *Welcome to the N.H.K.*. Through comparing these two social types through the primary characters of Tatsuhiro Satou and Kaoru Yamazaki, alongside the mediation of a third party in Misaki Nakahara, I explore how the series both satirizes and sympathizes with these types. Tamaki Saitō's seminal text on hikikomori and Hiroki Azuma's comprehensive book on otaku form the theoretical basis upon which my analysis of *N.H.K.*'s portrayal of these social types is founded, along with texts that themselves have built upon Saitō and Azuma's works. Ultimately, I argue that *Welcome to the N.H.K.* sees alternative lifestyles like hikikomori and otaku not as socially and societally predestined paths, but dynamic social types that, through interacting with each other, beget a re-emergence into society.

Moreover, through incorporating Thomas Lamarre's "animetic interval" theory and Ian Condry's "collaborative creativity" regarding anime, I argue that *Welcome to the N.H.K.* also comments on and criticizes its own medium while simultaneously asserting itself as a story that can only be told in anime. Along the way, I also examine both how the series discusses the modern emergence of virtual relationships through media like anime and computer games and suicide and desperation as catalysts for rebirth. Ultimately, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* anchors itself around hope, regeneration, and self-acceptance as key for hikikomori, otaku, and those in similar positions to re-emerge into society. This re-emergence must happen in distinctly individualized ways that coalesce into collaborative processes that, in the end, begin the movement outwards into new developments of self and community.

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**“THE SOUL ON STRIKE THAT STRIKES THROUGH AFFECT”:
ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES, OLD ANXIETIES, AND NEW BEGINNINGS IN
*WELCOME TO THE N.H.K.***

The anime series *Welcome to the N.H.K.* is built of and around fundamental and familiar Japanese social materials – the hikikomori and the otaku. Tamaki Saitō, author of the seminal *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*, defines hikikomori as “social withdrawal,” further elaborating: “A state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source” (24). *N.H.K.* explores hikikomori primarily through its protagonist Tatsuhiro Satou, whose view on being a hikikomori most clearly arises near the end of the series: “because one’s food, clothing and shelter are often assured, regardless of situation. In today’s society, as long as you’re guaranteed at least the barest essentials, you can continue to live out your hollow existence indefinitely” (“Welcome to Misaki!” 00:16:30-46). Otaku, meanwhile, is defined by Hiroki Azuma as “a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on” (3). Through Kaoru Yamazaki, the series’ primary representation of otaku, and his struggles with societal acceptance and familial pressures, *N.H.K.* challenges the widespread pessimism around hikikomori and otaku, asserting that they are not doomed to live as static social types. Rather, Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s dramatic and dynamic interactions propose the possibility of escape from their socially and societally predestined paths – they, with the help of a third party in Misaki Nakahara, save each other and, in the process, save themselves.

Crucial to this narrative of regeneration are both the mediation of Misaki as a third party and the role *N.H.K.*’s medium itself, anime, plays. Misaki serves as both a support for and foil against Tatsuhiro, complicating the notion that hikikomori can re-emerge into society through the advent and assistance of others by portraying their relationship as both toxic and supportive. Furthermore, the series sets itself apart from its novel and manga source materials by strengthening the connection between its various narrative threads and themes through its status as anime. Incorporating Thomas Lamarre’s theory of the “animetic interval” and Ian Condry’s view of anime as “collaborative creativity” into an analysis of the regeneration of the hikikomori

and the otaku in *N.H.K.* allows one to see how the series tells a story that can only be told in anime. *Welcome to the N.H.K.* anchors itself around hope, from hikikomori as regenerative to otaku as showing the value in alternative lifestyles, ultimately touting self-acceptance and re-emergence as coordinating with a union of one's relationships to others and one's relationship to one's self. By working through our problems in distinctly individualized ways that coalesce into collaborative processes, we begin a movement outward towards new beginnings in the development of self and community.

Welcome to the N.H.K. began as a 2002 novel written by Tatsuhiko Takimoto, adapted first into a manga¹ in 2003 and then an anime in 2006. Anime sets itself apart from other media due both to the inimitable visuality of animation and the production processes involved in its creation. Thomas Lamarre and Ian Condry argue for and theorize about anime in their books *The Anime Machine* and *The Soul of Anime*, respectively. Lamarre creates what he deems a “media theory of animation”: a melding of production processes, cultural and industry histories, and literary critical analyses into a broader theoretical framework for thinking about anime and how anime “thinks technology” (xxx). Anime both “*works with* technology and *thinks* about [it]” primarily through what Lamarre deems the “animetic machine,” defined as “an internal limit within the materiality of animation that allows for a distinctively animetic manner of doing, thinking, and feeling the world” that “not only comprises the humans who make it and work with it, but also on other virtual and actual machines” (xxxii, xxvi). The machine creates images that are both always moving and eternally static – anime is given life not just through those who create it but those who consume it. It is a conscious and unconscious movement between the layers of an image – the harmony of the rendered characters, their actions, and their environment– which Lamarre terms the “animetic interval” (7).

In his further defining and exploring of these critical terms, Lamarre first focuses on the production side of anime, including the advent of technology like Disney's multiplane camera and Osamu Tezuka's innovation of animating “on threes,” using eight drawings per second instead of the standard twelve (187). These revolutions led to contemporary, digitally produced anime, which retain Tezuka's limited animation with the animetic techniques of the multiplane camera digitized and streamlined. Contemporary anime, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* included,

¹ “[A] Japanese genre of cartoons and comic books” (OED, “manga, n.2.”).

typically mix both limited and full animation for a variety of effects. For exaggerated or lively movements, full animation imbues characters with “the energies and forces of the body,” while limited animation is cost saving, sparing animators from having to render a character’s every movement (70). Animators, thus, rely on viewers to fill in the gap, engage in the animetic interval, and implicitly understand that movement appears as “potentiality,” as “a world of action in which you cannot be sure what will happen next, or where it will come from” (194). Therefore, as much as anime is the result of the various processes involved in its creation and production, it also hinges on an unspoken agreement with viewers that anime does not stop once it hits the screen.

Rather, this unspoken agreement is where anime comes alive, best exemplified in Condry’s *The Soul of Anime*. Condry argues that the “soul” of anime comes from “collaborative creativity”: the “social dynamics that lead people to put their energy into today’s media worlds” (2). Where Lamarre examines the relationship between anime and viewer from the perspective of the processes involved in creating the animation itself, Condry approaches anime ethnographically, exploring the global cultural effects and relationships central to the medium. What makes anime special is how it “develop[s] in instinctive ways, energized in part through fan relationships” (Condry 21). The impact and proliferation of anime come from how it extends beyond the work into merchandise, promotional events, and fan interactions through fan fiction (*doujinshi*), forums, and fan-made products. Everything amalgamates into “social energy, a kind of unseen force, or dark energy, that best explains the expansion of the anime universe” (22-23). Just as limited animation relies on the viewer to fill in the gaps, Condry argues, anime includes an “open space [for creativity] that people can fill with their energy, commitment, and skill” (137). Lamarre’s animetic interval becomes Condry’s collaborative creativity, becomes “possibilities for others to revolve around, build on, and extend” (Condry 137).

Though the anime of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* predates both Lamarre and Condry’s texts by years, the concepts and theories discussed in those texts are readily found throughout the series. Both full and limited animation exemplify the intense stasis, internal pressures, and struggles to re-emerge felt by hikikomori. Tatsuhiro and Kaoru directly engage with the social energy of fandom while Misaki channels collaboration to help Tatsuhiro overcome his social withdrawal. It is this collective social energy, the togetherness and the anime-producer-viewer

relationship, that makes anime remarkable and worth studying. It is how we begin the slow movement out into the world – anime allows us to connect and engage with that social energy. It is how we watch Tatsuhiro begin to re-emerge.

Welcome to the N.H.K. uses its extended opening sequence to establish both the life and living space of a typical hikikomori, as well as Tatsuhiro's mindset. "There's no doubt about it: this is a conspiracy. That's right; I am a victim, and I have become ensnared in a massive, a terrifying, an all-consuming conspiracy"; *N.H.K.* opens with surreal visuals, discordant music, and a lone male figure framed against the world ("Welcome to the Project!" 0:01:58-2:37). The yet-unnamed figure dodges bullets and runs as a repeating group of cartoon characters chant "conspiracy." As a girl under a parasol looks on, he lights a grenade and runs to attack a dark mass. And then, he wakes up. An aerial shot reveals the man's apartment: empty beer cans and a full ashtray on the table, pornography on the floor, dirty clothes strewn about, while muted and dark tones cast the room in a sinister, sad light. "I really feel like my brain's been out of whack lately," the man thinks to himself ("the Project" 0:03:55-4:02). The noise of crickets contrasts with the muffled music of his next-door neighbour. The man's increasing frustration leads to hallucinations and, finally, a resolve to confront the neighbour. Here, the camera frames his hallway as an impossibly long tunnel. As he moves to leave, a flashback reminds him why he stays inside: others talk about him, make fun of him, are out to get him. More hallucinations, including the various appliances around his apartment coming to life and talking to him. Finally, the man realizes the truth: "by airing addictive anime, they're mass-producing otaku, and by mass-producing otaku they're contributing to the massive emergence of NEET" ("the Project" 0:10:09-16). "*Nihon Hikikomori Kyoukai*": Japanese Hikikomori Association², the cause of the man's reclusiveness, his hikikomori condition. The hikikomori is both insular and expansive, his room becoming an entire world. For Tatsuhiro, that world manifests itself as both a conspiracy and a vicious cycle: his appliances tell him the world is out to get him, and because he isolates himself from the larger world, their suggestions become truth. Saitō notes that hikikomori typically experience similar vicious cycles as symptoms like "a fear of others, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and delusions of persecution... [which] will not get better without participating in society or receiving some sort of treatment" (85). The reasons for Tatsuhiro's

² Also the name of Japan's public broadcast network: *Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai*

hallucinations are never fully revealed, but the series hints at the idea that it arose out of his extended isolation manifesting as psychosis.

Saitō repeatedly stresses throughout *Hikikomori* that “restoring the point of connection between the individual and society” is the most crucial step in reintegrating hikikomori, and Misaki Nakahara fulfills that initial role for Tatsuhiro (113). Near the end of the first episode, Tatsuhiro receives a letter from her informing him that she has selected him for her special project, beginning their relationship and Tatsuhiro’s process of re-emergence. He meets her in the park, and she informs him that she is here to “rescue” him (“the Project” 0:22:06). Earlier in the episode, Misaki visited Tatsuhiro’s apartment with her religious aunt to hand out pamphlets. Spurred by their assumptions about him being a hikikomori, Tatsuhiro leaves to look for part-time work. Twice in the span of one episode, she causes him to leave his apartment. For the first half of the first episode, Tatsuhiro is entirely alone except in flashbacks. Misaki, Tatsuhiro’s first point of connection, makes herself apparent by disrupting his solitude; it is because of other people that Tatsuhiro physically leaves his space of isolation. Michael Zielenziger, too, stresses the importance of re-establishing the point of connection with society, calling it the “single ray of light” for those in “hiding” (297). Though Zielenziger takes an arguably problematic, Western-focused approach to Japanese hikikomori, often stigmatizing the larger nation as encouraging the spread of social withdrawal, he nonetheless stresses reconciling the individual and society, thus reaffirming its importance.

As Tatsuhiro walks in this first episode, the camera frames him as the solitary figure, always off-centre. As Lamarre notes, the standard of animation is a “movement into depth,” of the various layers of the animated image moving and scaling in such a way as to mimic our perception of the world (20). *Welcome to the N.H.K.*’s early scenes of Tatsuhiro moving through the outside world are not a movement into depth, but a movement *on top of* depth. The world stays static as he wanders throughout it, each footstep animated as both laboured and stationary – moving perpetually in place. These scenes throughout the initial episodes establish the immense pressure felt by Tatsuhiro, and those like him, to reintegrate with society. Whereas the novel of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* is from Tatsuhiro’s first-person perspective, the anime takes the animetic and filmic opportunities afforded by the medium to more effectively frame Tatsuhiro within the world, rather than within himself. While Pusztai does note that there exists a “powerful *synergy*

among... various media platforms,” specifically novels, manga, and anime, *N.H.K.* also sets itself apart through how it firmly places itself within its medium, taking the foundations laid by its source materials and fully building upon them (142). In doing this, the series establishes itself not just as a work of anime, but a work that can only be anime. The only other moving objects during Tatsuhiro’s walk are vehicles: cars, trains, a child on a bicycle, all objects indicative of societal progress and forward movement – all moving faster than Tatsuhiro. But, crucially, he is moving. Not around his apartment, but through the world, forward to an unknown destination.

Theories of why people socially withdraw are as widespread as hikikomori themselves. Familial issues, school-related trauma, the breakdown of communication in modernity, and a general feeling of unfitness for society are possible causes (Allison 74). For Tatsuhiro, flashbacks to his pre-social withdrawal life reveal a combination of both school-related trauma and anxiety as causes. An older classmate introduces the idea of conspiracy theories to him, leading to a panic attack caused by an assumption that those around him are subtly mocking him. Society is dangerous, according to Tatsuhiro, and people are a symptom and cause of that danger. They, as he remarks, “are always spouting off nonsense about love and friendship, but the truth is if it came down to it, they’d stab you in the back without a second thought” (“Welcome to the Game Over!” 0:12:25-34). Tatsuhiro’s process of re-emergence thus involves not only returning to society but reconnecting with others. Unlike the movement atop depth as he maneuvers his way through the world, engaging with others involves both a conscious effort and willingness to engage with that depth. It is this reconnection that makes Misaki such a central person for Tatsuhiro.

Though their first meeting in the park ends when he rejects her help, Tatsuhiro returns the next night fearing for Misaki’s safety. Moreover, though he lies about the severity of his social withdrawal, he nonetheless continues to engage in Misaki’s project. Hairston writes, “Her counseling sessions are little more than lectures and inspirational aphorisms, but she provides him with the human contact he needs to come out of his shell” (320). Misaki fits the trope of female anime characters who, through their friendly and mysterious demeanour, gradually bring the aloof or otherwise disengaged male protagonist out of his shell. Haruhi Suzumiya from *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* and Nagisa Furukawa from *Clannad* are examples contemporary to *N.H.K.*, while *Hyouka*’s Eru Chitanda and Rikka Takanashi from *Love,*

Chunibyō & Other Delusions are more current examples. As the series continues and both the viewer and Tatsuhiro learn more about her, however, Misaki gradually disrupts her archetype through her toxic intentions. Regardless, Tatsuhiro slowly opens to her, and they begin to bond. “Don’t worry, all I want to do is help you so you can get better,” she assures him (“Welcome to the Creator!” 00:02:48-51). She repeatedly frames his social withdrawal as a disease and something in need of fixing, a mindset foreshadowing her twisted dependence on him. It is, as Saitō notes, a “multifaceted issue that cannot be explained away as simply a problem of individual pathology” (76). Critically, however, Misaki is Tatsuhiro’s catalyst and link to the outside world, spurring both the events of the series and his development.

Misaki is not alone in this endeavour, though, as Kaoru Yamazaki both assists Tatsuhiro’s re-emergence and stands on his own as emblematic of another of *N.H.K.*’s primary targets for commentary and satire: otaku. While outsiders generally view otaku as both “immature social misfits” and “threats to society,” otaku themselves embrace the term as both identity-forming and identity in itself (Azuma 4, 123). We see this within *N.H.K.* when Tatsuhiro imagines breaking into his neighbour’s apartment to tell him to turn down their music; he shouts, “you goddamn otaku! Turn that shit down!” (“the Project” 00:05:20-23). The term is used as an insult, but once Tatsuhiro meets the neighbour, Kaoru, we see how otaku embody the label. As with Tatsuhiro, our first view of Kaoru’s apartment is a visual exploration. Anime figures, manga, and anime DVDs line the shelves, and pornographic posters cover the walls, but the apartment is relatively clean and organized. Although Kaoru never directly calls himself an otaku in this first encounter, his room and his attitudes embody the passion and lifestyle of otaku. Though *N.H.K.* satirizes otaku through Kaoru’s obsessive fervour, it also sympathizes with them. The series moves away from the view of otaku as indicative of “antisocial behaviour and potentially dangerous habits” (though Kaoru is not exempt from these qualities) towards otaku as having “future-oriented, postindustrial sensibilities that contribute to the global strength of Japanese products in popular culture” (Condry 188). Through Kaoru, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* establishes that it seeks not to mock otaku but portray, examine, and, redeem them as an alternative lifestyle stemming from the postmodern fragmentation of contemporary society.

Kaoru also plays a part in Tatsuhiro’s re-emergence after learning that he is a hikikomori. Through both his and Misaki’s introductions, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* sets the foundation for the

hikikomori's re-emergence alongside examining the otaku through Kaoru and the equally crucial and problematic role of Misaki as the third party. To reiterate Saitō, central to re-emergence for hikikomori is "restoring the point of connection" between the individual and society as well as between the individual and others (113). Restoring the point of connection to society is only one half of Saitō's "Two Steps for Recovery," with the second being restoring the point of connection between "the individual and the family" (113). Tatsuhiro's family is nearly non-existent throughout *N.H.K* – his mother appears in one episode and, in effect, reinforces his hikikomori tendencies through her inability to directly intervene in his life. Thus, Misaki and Kaoru fulfill the role of family for Tatsuhiro, simultaneously bringing him into the world while also forming connections with him that, though imperfect, inspire growth and change. In doing so, *N.H.K.* takes Saitō's notion of the family and extends it to include the larger social circles of friends and peers as indicative of Azuma's notion of the otaku as engaging in postmodern communication stemming from "desire and sociality" (93). Moreover, Tatsuhiro consistently inspires change in others, too, reinforcing the notion of individual growth manifesting into interpersonal relationships, and vice versa. Therefore, not only does *Welcome to the N.H.K.* move away from viewing hikikomori and otaku as entirely negative stereotypes, but also confronts and rethinks the idea of family through the intense and dynamic bonds between Tatsuhiro, Kaoru, and Misaki.

Tatsuhiro's relationship with Kaoru also, and perhaps most crucially, advocates for the otaku lifestyle as valuable and productive instead of stagnant and futile – their mutual bond turns into mutual growth. In episode four, Kaoru takes Tatsuhiro to a maid café³ and a *doujinshi* shop. This excursion begins with an extended sequence of the two walking, as when Tatsuhiro left his apartment in the first episode, on top of depth, rather than through it. However, Tatsuhiro is not alone. He and Kaoru converse as the otaku spurs the hikikomori along, slowly entering a bustling shopping district as Tatsuhiro looks on in amazement. As Kaoru introduces Tatsuhiro to the world of otaku, both he and the uninformed viewer come to realize the life of an otaku is fundamentally interconnected with other otaku, a camaraderie arising through similarity. As the two men ogle the maid serving them food and gawk at pornographic manga, they begin building

³ A type of restaurant in which "waitresses in maid uniforms address customers as 'master,'" common amongst otaku-types looking for somewhere "'homey'" (*Prohibited Desires* 97-98).

a friendship arising from a mutual attraction not just to superficial titillation, but to the broader culture of which they are a part. Saitō's advocacy for individual reconciliation with society here arises through of Tatsuhiro engaging with otaku culture. Tatsuhiro and Kaoru are drawn as physically less detailed compared to how they are rendered when in their apartments, thus placing them on the same plane as the background characters – they meld into the scenery, more fully integrated with the world and its depth, indicating their slow re-integration with the larger world. The series “dehierarchizes [the] layers of the image, [inviting] us to perceive the structuration of the elements rather than their relations of movement” (Lamarre 110-111). Lamarre also stresses looking at how these characters move during these moments, seeing how the animetic interval arises through the potentiality for characters like Tatsuhiro and Kaoru to simultaneously break out of their status as pseudo-background characters and yet remain a part of their rendered world. At moments like these, which the series inserts regularly throughout, we are forced to look at Tatsuhiro and Kaoru not as discrete characters, but as symbols. They stand in for all the otaku and hikikomori who may be watching, inviting those viewers to realize that they, too, can venture out into the world.

As otaku and budding-otaku, both characters feel a deep attraction to animated, 2D characters, a trait Condry legitimizes as “an otaku perspective on masculinity” that “reminds us of the vulnerability experienced by many men who live outside the dominant ideal of male success” (195). Individuals like Tatsuhiro and Kaoru, self-admittedly, exist outside the social and cultural norm; however, rather than bemoan their status, they “find alternative sources of value... [rationalizing] alternative modes of existence as engaged, rewarding, and meaningful” (Condry 195). As with the juxtaposition of Tatsuhiro's vision of himself as an action-hero saviour against his social withdrawal alongside his slow growth with Kaoru, *N.H.K.* repeatedly stresses that it is okay to be an otaku; it is okay to live an alternative lifestyle. That, in itself, is Condry's idea of collaborative creativity: solidarity breeding togetherness which, in turn, breeds alternate forms of society (Condry 111). Moreover, otaku and “otaku masculinity” challenge and “[expand] the varieties of manhood” alongside “rethinking how productivity and consumption offer alternative modes for evaluating contemporary men” (Condry 196). A “distributed collective force of desire,” *Welcome to the N.H.K.* touts otaku as imperfect but passionate, positive in their challenging of masculine norms and in how the otaku lifestyle brings Tatsuhiro out of his social withdrawal (“Otaku Movement” 359).

The central narrative of *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, besides Tatsuhiro's re-emergence, is his and Kaoru's attempt to make an *ero*ge⁴. The making of the *ero*ge both brings the two individuals closer together and brings them further into otaku fandom, which together encourage their redemption and re-emergence. Kaoru lends Tatsuhiro a selection of *ero*ge and his collection of pornographic pictures for research. Tatsuhiro quickly becomes obsessed, latching onto the pseudo-communication and socialization that they provide. While Saitō does advocate for using technology "to engage in different kinds of communication," he stresses that that communication must be with a real, actual person on the other end (163). Kaoru and Tatsuhiro both use the games as an escape from reality and to supplement and replace physical communication and connection their everyday lives lack. At a café, they come up with what they believe to be the perfect heroine for their *ero*ge: a childhood friend-classmate-nextdoor-neighbour-robot-maid-ghost-alien-fox-spirit who, in her previous life, was the main character's lover and is currently sick, requiring the main character to take care of her ("Welcome to the New World!" 00:18:38-19:33). Kaoru sketches the girl, and the result is a mess of tropes unnaturally stitched together.

The *ero*ge plot is where *N.H.K.* leans most heavily into satire, here mocking otaku who forgo real women for those in the virtual realm. Hairston writes, "[Tatsuhiro] does not create a new character as much as he just repeats the tropes of various existing *moe*⁵ female characters, combining them into a single character that emphasizes just how fantastically unreal these characters are" (317). Tatsuhiro and Kaoru's unrealistic expectations of women feed back into their general dissatisfaction with modern society, their endless search for perfection leaving them eternally unfulfilled. On erotic manga, Allison writes that "[f]emale signifies sex, and male, absent from the literal page, is positioned as a sexual player only as a voyeur" (*Prohibited Desires* 61). *Ero*ge substitutes voyeurism for engagement through dialogue that directly addresses the player, giving them the agency to advance scenarios to their expected, erotic conclusion. Tatsuhiro and Kaoru perpetuate the stereotype of the "perverted otaku" through their fervent consumption of *ero*ge and their dream of creating their own – elements which *Welcome to the N.H.K.* asserts are both, perhaps paradoxically, harmful and regenerative.

⁴ Erotic video game

⁵ "an appreciation for the posture or stance or mien of a character—the way a character looks or speaks—with cute and erotic implications. To evoke the term *moe* is to indicate an ineluctable appreciation or fascination for the character" ("Otaku Movement" 380).

Though *Welcome to the N.H.K.* foregrounds satire through Tatsuhiko and Kaoru's love of fictional girls, it also suggests that this type of virtual contact is beneficial. Though the men playing these games are ultimately in control of advancing the dialogue and progressing the story, they have little power over what that dialogue is. Allison calls passive engagement with erotic materials a "decentering of sex, gender, and even power from male genitalia" that ultimately suggests, "gendered identity might [need to] significantly change" (*Prohibited Desires* 78-79). One of the most striking images of Tatsuhiko's transformation into an otaku comes from a series of stills as he sits at his computer playing *eroge*. The tissue boxes pile up on his table, implying masturbation; echoing Allison's argument, Tatsuhiko can receive only self-pleasure despite feeling a genuine attachment to these characters. In a series that uses movement and vibrant animation to assert progress, the complete stillness as Tatsuhiko descends into unhealthy obsession stands in stark and deliberate contrast. Kaoru eventually forces Tatsuhiko back into reality by reminding him of their *eroge*-in-progress – physical connection and communication allows Tatsuhiko to move again. By the end of the fourth episode, though Hairston asserts that Tatsuhiko is not a "true otaku" like Kaoru, he fulfills much the same purpose (316). Hikikomori and otaku mix as Tatsuhiko immerses himself in a new world, both virtually through *eroge* and pornography and physically when they embark on their outing.

"Fake" connection paves the way for "real," though *Welcome to the N.H.K.* constantly and deliberately conflates and confuses the two. Wilson asserts,

While the central premiss of *Welcome to the NHK* is a 'paranoid' fantasy concerning a conspiracy to mass-produce millions of hikikomori, the ideal consumers of Japanese popular culture, through the seductions of manga, anime and hentai, it nevertheless hints at, even as it exaggerates, the way in which the production of neoliberal subjectivity, through the seductive appeal of simulated, CG transgression, is also a means of governance. (398)

As Kaoru bursts through the door and the tissue-box tower sways, *N.H.K.* reminds us that though *eroge*, manga, and anime might be a means to control the masses, we can still assert our individuality through others. It manifests as a "collective energy," "a focus of attention and a circulatory movement that constantly reframes what anime is about"; moreover, it is a "kind of soul, the tendrils that run through media and connect us to others" (Condry 111). Wilson calls

hikikomori “[g]enerated and enabled by the proliferation of new media entertainments,” but it is also those entertainments which enable hikikomori and otaku to emerge in alternative ways (398). Condry queries otaku obsessions and alternative lifestyles in the form of a question: “how does this reframe the contexts in which we imagine social action?” (199). Answering himself, Condry asserts that otaku engagement with the virtual world is “a plea for accepting a new kind of relationship between consumption as feelings (as love) and society” (202) *Welcome to the N.H.K.* extends this answer to Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s budding bond and through how their experiences in the virtual world allow them to engage with the physical, the series indicating its stance most conclusively with the fourth episode’s title: “Welcome to the New World!”

Welcome to the N.H.K. juxtaposes Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s experience with virtual women against their interactions with actual women, most notably with Kaoru and Nanako Midorikawa. After hearing from Misaki that Kaoru has a girlfriend, Tatsuhiro travels to Kaoru’s college to find out the truth. Kaoru’s school life reveals itself as one of solitude in which he talks to no one and diligently does his classwork. Later, Tatsuhiro finds him attempting to flirt with Nanako, one of his classmates, later overhearing her talking with her friends and deriding Kaoru for being “such an otaku” and “half hikikomori” (“Welcome to the Classroom!” 00:19:35-48). Nanako and her friends fall into the prevalent cultural consciousness that otaku are asocial, Tsutomu Miyazaki-like individuals. Miyazaki, known as “The Otaku Killer,” murdered four girls between 1988 and 1989, an event which the media latched onto as stemming from his otaku tendencies and inability to “distinguish between reality and fiction” (Ishikawa 40). Though the cultural zeitgeist has since moved away from complete derision of otaku, *N.H.K.* juxtaposes those who still view alternative lifestyles like otaku as deplorable against those who advocate for otaku, in effect showing the harm in the former way of thinking. Where the original novel takes an introspective look at hikikomori, the anime broadens its scope to focus more heavily on Kaoru and the rest of the supporting cast. In doing so, though the anime necessarily engages in “excision... a paring down or surgery that removes whole sections, subplots, and sets of characters,” it becomes more broadly recognizable to a variety of viewers (McFarlane 24). Thus, the series manifests its true goal, augmented by its status as a widely broadcasted anime, as rehabilitative and ultimately sympathetic to otaku, hikikomori, and those who live outside the social norm – a goal that, as the latter half of the series shows, it undoubtedly achieves.

Moreover, it reflects Pusztaï's notion of ““adapting the medium”” instead of ““adapting the story,”” in effect legitimizing the anime as a complete work beyond its source materials (147).

In a world where *eroge*, anime, and other character-driven media exist, otaku culture “reflects an awakened desire among Japanese to perceive relationships as chosen” (Ishikawa 53). Kaoru manages to keep up the façade of his relationship with Nanako to Tatsuhiro, a lie which the series frames as heart-breaking through the minor-key guitar accompanying the dialogue. Tatsuhiro knows the truth but allows Kaoru to maintain the lie, an unsaid understanding between the two that reflects Ishikawa's notion of the otaku “controlling the frames and quality of one's own relationships” (53). Though both Misaki and Kaoru insert themselves into Tatsuhiro's life, they nonetheless exist together in a complex web of necessary and unspoken desires. Kaoru's lie reflects his desire for a romantic relationship, highlighting his struggle with being an otaku whose home is the virtual world and a social being who desires the physical world.

Kaoru's struggle with his attraction to Nanako extends to his and Tatsuhiro's *eroge* as he designs the main character to look and act like Nanako, a projection of his desires onto a character who will not reject him. However, to reiterate Allison, crafting a virtual recreation of Nanako reinforces Kaoru's passivity and “symbolically express[es] and therefore deflect[s] [his] aggression” (77). What Kaoru and otaku cannot achieve in the real world, they supplement and construct in the virtual. During work on their *eroge*, Tatsuhiro suggests attending a fireworks festival, which Kaoru vehemently opposes because of Nanako's rejection regarding the same festival. “Women are nothing but a plague on this world,” he shouts, expressing his fundamental distrust of women stemming from repeated rejection – and then Nanako calls, asking Kaoru if he still wants to go to the fireworks (“Welcome to a Summer Day!” 00:18:29-19:43). Tatsuhiro later attends with Misaki, and both men rescind their insular lifestyles for the evening. Ishikawa calls this slow building of relationships “a preference [by otaku] for keeping interactions within a specific frame but, at the same time, widening the network of relations within this frame, or increasing the numbers of such frames” (55).

In future episodes, both men consistently return to virtual women, reinforcing that for those in similar alternative lifestyles, an amalgamation of virtual and physical relationships is natural, is a part of their “frames.” Ishikawa also sees this amalgamation and deliberate selection of relationships as, ultimately, a “[search] for an inner self,” a “*relational self*” in which one

forms one's identity around and through others as well as from the inside out (56). We project ourselves onto others, and they project onto us, changing and growing in the process. Misaki brings Tatsuhiro into the world, Nanako reminds Kaoru that women are not all untrustworthy, and both characters slowly no longer move on top of depth, but around and in it. Their experiences in the virtual, in *eroge* and in connected solitude, prepare them for the fireworks, for the real. The camera frames Tatsuhiro and Misaki moving side-by-side, enmeshed in the crowd and distinctly indistinct. We never see Kaoru, but the music and framing imply his evening progresses much the same. Tatsuhiro and Misaki hold hands as he thinks, "Well, if this is some kind of trap, maybe it's not so bad" ("Summer Day" 00:21:57-03).

The revelation of Kaoru's circumstances surrounding his family and his life in Tokyo causes both the breakdown of his relationship with Nanako and reframes his attitude throughout the series as one of a continual fight against an inevitable future. "Women will lie to you without a second thought. They're laughing at us behind our backs right now"; his mindset reverts to its pre-fireworks state as he finds, and misconstrues the circumstances of, Nanako talking with another man while waiting for him to arrive for a date ("Welcome to the Dark Side!" 00:11:26-32). For the rest of the series, Kaoru rejects physical relationships in favour of the virtual. In episode twenty, he reveals to Tatsuhiro that his parents expect him to take over the family ranch once he graduates. He outlines their plan for his life: move to the family ranch at twenty-two, marry at twenty-five, first child at twenty-seven, second at twenty-nine, retire at sixty-four, and "at age eighty, death" ("Welcome to Winter Days!" 00:10:20-48). After receiving the news that his father is sick, he realizes the *eroge* must sell well, or he will have to return home. Azuma frames otaku as reflecting the "social structure of postmodernity" through "the omnipresence of simulacra and the dysfunctionality of grand narrative," the latter arising through Kaoru's family planning his entire life (29). Kaoru's otaku lifestyle is a reaction against that narrative, his seclusion in the virtual a means by which he exerts his will on a life that appears in every way works against him. Azuma's notion that simulacra form an otaku's reality reveals itself through Kaoru and Tatsuhiro's *eroge* taking elements from their lives and their rapid consumption of similar media. As Lamarre notes, it is indeed a "strategy of refusal" and a "resistance to labor organized in received ways," but for Kaoru, it is also the desire to exert his subjectivity ("Otaku Movement" 371). He rejects Nanako by inviting her over to his apartment and fully displaying his otaku lifestyle. "I may look harmless, but I'm really a perverted super-otaku!" he proudly

shouts (“Winter Days” 00:18:28-32). However, instead of fleeing, she admires his passion, calling it “manly,” to which Kaoru responds by further dismissing her as a pervert herself, causing her to punch him and leave (“Winter Days” 00:19:11-20:26). Where before Kaoru lied about his relationship with Nanako to maintain his false reality, here he again denies her feelings for what he perceives as her own good, seeing his move back to his family as an inevitability. In the penultimate episode before Kaoru’s departure, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* broadens its scope of re-emergence and reconciliation to include grim sacrifice alongside tenuous hope. Kaoru clings to his otaku identity, reinforcing its importance as who he is and his place in the larger world. It gives his life of “randomly chosen finite elements” a “subjectivity” stemming from “*the desire for a small narrative*,” a desire for individuality in a world of similarity (Azuma 85, 86).

Kaoru’s story ends not on a triumphant flourish but a tragic whimper. He and Tatsuhiro finally finish their *eroge* and bring it to Winter Comic Market. Selling only five copies, Kaoru confesses, “The truth is I don’t really care if the game sells or not... I just wanna leave something behind, proof that I lived in Tokyo” (“Welcome to Reset!” 00:03:48-55). Kaoru’s confession further reframes his attitudes and goals of desiring individuality outside of his predestined future. He sees himself failing as a “good otaku,” one whose “measure... is his productivity” (Condry 189). A lighthearted snowball fight between Tatsuhiro and Kaoru turns into a heated exchange, as Kaoru calls the former a “stupid hikikomori” for not recognizing that his schooling was “the opportunity of a lifetime” (“Reset” 00:08:52-59). Misaki arrives and breaks them up while Kaoru delivers one of the series’ most powerful lines: “A drama has a progressive plot, an emotional climax, and a resolution, but our lives aren’t like that. All we get, day after day, are a bunch of vague anxieties that are never really resolved” (“Reset” 00:09:37-49). Kaoru recognizes that the fictional narratives he clings onto are, in the end, fantasies. His recognition resonates with the otaku as postmodern subject searching for the small narratives that coalesce into something greater. *Welcome to the N.H.K.* repeatedly asserts, through the irony of its dramatic form, that, yes, life is not a drama, but it is the coalescence of those small narratives, those small moments, that create something akin to drama, akin to a greater meaning. Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s friendship, their bickering and bonding, begets development and change, progress and re-emergence. Though they come together through “unresolved vague anxieties,” they form them into meaning through individual growth and collaborative creativity. The otaku both exists

and thrives outside “fixed social or historical identities,” postmodern because they perpetuate “the non-relation at the heart of the all-relatedness of information” (“Otaku Movement” 391).

A montage of Kaoru and Tatsuhiro’s friendship plays as he leaves, and in the next episode, he calls Tatsuhiro. Drunk, he explains that “out here in the boonies, everyone gets along with everyone else as long as everyone’s drinking” (“Welcome to the God!” 00:15:27-32). His new life reveals itself as fueled by substances that make daily life tolerable, though he eventually meets a girl and effectively settles down. A panning shot reveals his new, dimly lit room, still containing otaku-like goods, but stable, sterile, and lifeless as the shots remain nearly unanimated. Kaoru ultimately backs away from his identity as otaku towards a grand narrative while maintaining otaku aspects. It is, in effect, a happy ending for his character, but one tinged with tragedy. The *eroge* did not sell, he does not become a game designer, and he moves away from Tokyo, the physical space in which he could maneuver and express his otaku-ness. Ishikawa presents the terms “parochial individualism” and “parochial socialism” (translated from “*henkyokuteki kojinchugi*” and “*henkyokuteki shakaishugi*,” respectively), the former an “excessive pursuit of individual freedom” and the latter a “[subsuming] [of] individual dignity under that of society” (208). Kaoru’s arc is a movement from Ishikawa’s notion of parochial individualism towards parochial socialism. The series slowly moves his character away from satire and parody towards pity and tragic passivity. Giving up his life in Tokyo is giving up his individualism. Thus, the series frames Kaoru’s position not as an example otaku should strive for, but to avoid.

To withdraw from society like Tatsuhiro is not the answer, nor is surrendering one’s self as Kaoru does. Make being an otaku your identity that you bring into the larger world; go to maid cafés and *doujinshi* shops, attend school and find love, and return home to your pornography. *N.H.K.* reminds us that not only is this lifestyle welcome but signals “the emergence of alternative social worlds” that otaku create and of “seeing the variety of ways in which consumption of the ‘virtual’ has real-world substance” (Condry 203). Ishikawa juxtaposes parochial individualism and socialism against “pure individualism” and “pure socialism,” more harmonious terms in which one engages in “social prosperity and individual independence” alongside maintaining “individual interests [as coinciding] with those of the collective” (208). Otaku engage with society through their distinctly individualized methods, embodying

Ishikawa's ideas and further asserting themselves as revealing an alternative way of living. Moreover, as anime, *N.H.K.* subtly pleases viewers to continue engaging with anime as a mode of collaborative creativity while also thinking critically about the implications of media consumption, lest one sacrifice oneself to a predestined future. Internally optimistic and externally grim, Kaoru Yamazaki stands as *Welcome to the N.H.K.*'s most striking example of positive otaku representation and its most tragic sacrifice, a symbol of the folly in denying the "little bit of otaku in all of us," the "ways in which otaku fans' attitudes reveal something about us all": the desperate desire assert one's radiant individuality (Condry 203).

Welcome to the N.H.K. concludes Kaoru's story and refocuses on Tatsuhiro and Misaki, how they find redemption and move forward. Analyzing where the series leaves Tatsuhiro at the end involves looking at how he gets there through two key narrative arcs: his involvements with an online suicide pact and with a multi-level marketing scheme, both of which occur before Kaoru's exit. These narrative arcs show how Tatsuhiro unwittingly uses his hikikomori status to inspire others' self-redemptions. The suicide pact arc begins when Tatsuhiro reunites with Hitomi Kashiwa, an old friend and the one who introduced him to the idea of the N.H.K. conspiracy. She invites him to the "offline meeting," a gathering of individuals Hitomi met online who share one goal: committing group suicide. Bringing up the N.H.K. conspiracy causes Tatsuhiro to join with little knowledge of what the meeting entails. Allison notes that suicide in Japan is "a national problem" most prominently affecting "men in their forties and fifties" and young people "between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four" – a problem she attributes to loneliness, "[t]he infrequency with which humans bump up against one another or help one another out" (168). *N.H.K.* both indirectly exemplifies and problematizes Allison's ideas through the suicide pact. The members' reasons for deciding to commit suicide vary from the shame of stealing money from one's parents, hopelessness after going bankrupt and through a divorce, and Hitomi wanting to escape the conspiracies that she believes control her life. What connects these disparate individuals is their mutual feelings of helplessness, a "'darkness' in the social fiber" and "something basically human" being missing (Allison 168). The prospect of death brings the group closer than they felt in their everyday lives, a fact which they all acknowledge. Tatsuhiro, meanwhile, sees the meetup as a vacation before slowly realizing its true intentions. Tatsuhiro's relatively vibrant movement and naivety directly contrast with the extremely limited animation of everyone else, a contrast which the series depicts as darkly humorous. As with the series

playing with and sympathizing Kaoru's extreme "otaku-ism," it uses the online meetup not to satirize suicide, but poke fun at Tatsuhiro's naivety and, in turn, emphasize the preciousness of life, the "healthy desire on the part of most to keep on living" (Saitō 49).

Tatsuhiro unintentionally "gathers sympathies" from the viewer through how his naivety manifests as a will to live while also exemplifying Saitō's central belief that hikikomori re-emerge through the intervention of others (Heinze and Thomas 163). His efforts to make friends with the group has a tangible effect on their outlooks, causing them to build a bonfire as a team and, more importantly, preventing their suicides. The organizer of the meetup remarks, "I was able to forget my pain and enjoy my last day," a sentiment the others share ("Welcome to Paradise!" 00:11:56-59). One by one, each member of the group backs out of the suicide pact when they realize that their death means bringing hardship onto others, be it family or friends. The prospect of togetherness that begets life; the presence of others – albeit faint – promotes growth and forward movement. "Only if you're alive can you start things over," one of the members remarks ("Paradise" 00:15:30-32). For Tatsuhiro and Hitomi, it takes the physical presence of Kaoru, Misaki, and Hitomi's boyfriend to cause them to continue living. They drive to the island on a boat and, each in their own way, stress the value in living. The members of the now-disbanded pact physically hold Tatsuhiro back from jumping and thus discredit Zielenziger's claim that suicide in Japan "represents the ultimate ritualistic expression of self-sacrifice to the collective" (196). The characters of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* do not continue living because of a perceived duty to larger society; they live because of innate needs for self-salvation and desires to express their individuality through their relationships to others, emphasizing "individuality as immanent in each person" (Ishikawa 208). Tatsuhiro's scream after being saved closes out the episode, a cry of simultaneous desperation, fear, and utter despair.

Furthermore, a jarring lack of movement permeates the failed suicide scene. Despite the series' movement away from the apartment, the stillness of and on the cliff face, again, emphasizes the ultimately harmful prospect of ending one's life. Tatsuhiro and the others are "soulful bodies... [embodying] the potentiality of the moving image" (*The Anime Machine* 202). Where Lamarre describes "soulful bodies" with inferred movement, *N.H.K.* uses the potential for movement within the literal frames and rendered bodies on screen to suggest life, the prospect of living, and the soulful bodies of its characters. The "spiritual, emotional, or psychological

qualities” that “appear inscribed on the surface” of *N.H.K.*’s characters are that of a future yet wrought and a past always present (*The Anime Machine* 201). Tatsuhiro connects soulful bodies and, as a result, “he gains our confidence” “as a dropout and an anti-hero, who never gives up,” encouraging those he interacts with and those watching him do the same, to see the preciousness of life and the value in living (Heinze and Thomas 162).

Tatsuhiro’s entanglement with a multi-level marketing scheme further emphasizes his innate capacity for bringing others into the world by forcing him to confront another hikikomori. Megumi Kobayashi, another old high school classmate, tricks him into joining a multi-level marketing company. In his attempts to leave, Megumi confesses that she is desperate for money to support her hikikomori brother, who spends every moment playing a massively multiplayer online game. Unlike Tatsuhiro, Yuichi exhibits extreme violent and antisocial behaviour to the point of screaming and crying when Tatsuhiro, Kaoru, and Misaki discover him. He eventually reveals his reasons for remaining socially withdrawn as stemming from feeling a lack of control in the world around him, echoing Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s own feelings. “Before you start dragging the people around you into your problems, you have to log out – permanently,” he advises Tatsuhiro (“Welcome to the Blue Bird!” 00:11:09-14). Re-emergence not only involves others coming to the hikikomori, but equally involves the hikikomori embracing others, beginning to log out of their withdrawal. For Yuichi, that process involves both Tatsuhiro confronting him and the removal of Megumi’s presence. She is arrested for her involvement in the scheme, and he begins to starve waiting for her. In his desperation, he finds work at a nearby restaurant as a delivery boy in exchange for a meal and, thus, begins his re-emergence.

Hairston sees Yuichi’s return to society as stemming from the idea that “at least some *hikikomori* can be cured with tough love and being kicked out of their nest” (319). While technically correct, Hairston fails to consider the innate will to live found within *N.H.K.*’s characters and the animetic techniques that render Yuichi as vibrant and hopeful. In his room, he, like Tatsuhiro, is rendered with limited animation; however, his movements as he delivers food are lively and expressive, directly symbolic of his changed and changing attitudes towards life. Yuichi is both “unframed” through his deliberate contrast with the background layers of the image and “enframed” by his own deliberate movements (*The Anime Machine* 196). Contained within Yuichi’s animetic intervals are weight, energy, and hope, things fundamentally missing

from the Yuichi deep into his social withdrawal. The restaurant owner remarks as much, comparing his previous “pale and skinny” frame to his new “energetic” attitude (“Blue Bird” 00:21:28-40). Yuichi, thus, represents the “individuation of the force of the moving image as embodied in classic full animation” and the potential of work as a driving factor in re-emergence (*The Anime Machine* 199). Though there exists a general anxiety for young people in finding “the gold standard of regular employment” – an anxiety which feeds into social withdrawal – Yuichi’s final position in *Welcome to the N.H.K.* attests to the value of small steps towards full re-integration and foreshadows the finale of the series (Allison 144).

Forever the “soul on strike that strikes through affect,” Tatsuhiro and his interventions in both the offline meetup and with Yuichi position him as someone whose presence encourages others to live; at the same time, Misaki both complements and complicates this idea in her relationship with Tatsuhiro (Allison 131). Misaki is *Welcome to the N.H.K.*’s primary moral centre, a seemingly infallible guide for Tatsuhiro, and the third party mediating his and Kaoru’s mutual recovery. She is the one “who is at [Tatsuhiro’s] side throughout the series,” bringing him food and maintaining the nightly counselling sessions, all in effort to bring Tatsuhiro out of his social withdrawal (Hairston 320). She subverts her status as a trope through her fundamentally self-serving nature regarding her relationship with Tatsuhiro. When Tatsuhiro is about to commit suicide during the offline meetup, Misaki’s plea directly indicates her feelings towards him and hints towards her selfish motives: “you’re a flesh and blood failure of a human being!... more useless and an even bigger waste of flesh than I am!” (“Paradise” 00:19:37-47). Bringing Tatsuhiro onto her project is ultimately an attempt to “salvage her own low self-esteem” stemming from the death her father, suicide of her mother, and physical abuse by her stepfather (Hairston 316). Withholding Misaki’s motivations until midway through the series places viewers alongside Tatsuhiro and forces them to confront their perception of her. Her relationship with him manifests as a warped version of *amae*, “the psychosocial dynamic of dependency” that guides much of Japanese daily life (Allison 68). It is, to re-figure Allison, a twisting of the “pining for what should have, what could have been, theirs as upwardly mobile youths who are hit instead by the stigma and rejection of (seeming failure), of being a loser” (68). It is a sensation that also marks Tatsuhiro and Kaoru’s lifestyles, but unlike either of them, Misaki actively manifests through Tatsuhiro – albeit with self-serving manipulation – the missing familial and social support necessary for her to engage with the larger world.

The series comes full circle by exploring their relationship and its development since the first episode, highlighting how, though the overarching toxicity of Misaki's dependence on him requires intervention, it is nonetheless that unhealthy obsession that gives Tatsuhiro the push he needs to begin the process of societal re-integration. At critical points throughout the series – after Tatsuhiro goes to Kaoru's college, post-offline meetup, and after Kaoru leaves – Misaki and Tatsuhiro's relationship experiences turbulence that results in a suspension of their contact. More critically, however, these nadirs result in Tatsuhiro descending back into full social withdrawal, indicating what Saitō describes as unhealthy “codependence” (107). Misaki and Tatsuhiro's relationship is both fundamentally flawed and entirely too codependent, but Heinze and Thomas also see it as “unorthodox, but complementary... at times reminiscent of the *amae* between mother and son” (161). Misaki fulfills a motherly role for Tatsuhiro, albeit “one-sided and unstable” (Saitō 107). She also serves as a “mirror” for him, and he for her, the importance of which arises through “one's love for oneself by loving other people or receiving the love of others” (Saitō 108). Though both parties still directly voice their lack of self-worth, they persist in their shared project for each other, and, in turn, for themselves.

Adapting Misaki and Tatsuhiro's relationship to anime from the novel and manga involves recognizing that, at its core, anime is a collaborative medium founded on a sense of shared community and labour. Adaptation, McFarlane asserts, is essentially “a yearning for a faithful rendering of *one's own version of the literary text*” (15). He further calls this yearning an “impossibility” due to “every reading of a literary text [being] a highly individual act of cognition and interpretation,” in effect solidifying the anime of *N.H.K.* as intentionally emblematic of its medium (15). To suggest that Tatsuhiro and Misaki's relationship is fundamentally unsustainable would be to contend with the very medium in which it exists; it would go against, as Condry states, “the often unpredictable potential of ongoing, collaborative projects” (4). Misaki's project is one such case, collaborative creativity not in terms of creating media but in creating life and living. It brings Tatsuhiro to the manga shop, to the fireworks festival, to the deserted island, and, ultimately, to the precipice of a new version of himself. It testifies to the enduring “contentious, chaotic, and fluid” qualities that give our relationships value and trigger innate and critical change (Condry 4).

Despite all the good in their relationship, the final episodes of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* make it clear that a reset is necessary for both Misaki and Tatsuhiro to truly re-emerge. The final episodes centre around Misaki attempting suicide after a series of misunderstandings and lies between her and Tatsuhiro come to light, leaving her feeling useless. Tatsuhiro finds her at a cliff near her hometown, preparing to jump. She rejects him when he “tries repeating the platitudes she taught him and telling her he needs her” (Hairston 321). He ends up blaming Misaki’s condition on the N.H.K., linking the finale to his mindset at the series beginning and extending the N.H.K. to God, to “whatever you want,” a symbol of the society’s perceived oppression against the individual (“Welcome to the N-H-K” 00:10:12-11:13). Tatsuhiro then “does battle” against the N.H.K. in a sequence also reminiscent of the opening of the series. He runs with an imagined grenade to attack an unidentifiable monster, only in the snow rather than a dreamscape. He jumps and sacrifices himself for the girl he admits he loves – and then falls onto a suicide-prevention net. Echoing Kaoru’s words about how “a dramatic death just doesn’t suit you,” Tatsuhiro is denied death not because he does not deserve it, but because he deserves to live (“N-H-K” 00:13:50-54). His unconscious desire to live manifests as a determination to save Misaki and, in the process, himself. In a series concerned with death and what it takes to keep living, it deliberately prevents any of its characters from dying to advocate for the preciousness of life.

Saitō’s notion that hikikomori have a “healthy desire... to keep on living” reappears through Tatsuhiro and Misaki’s renewed life after experiencing a symbolic death (49). They spend the night in an abandoned cabin sharing stories from their youth, a sense of new energy already filling both. The interior shot of the cabin is dark and still, a contrast to the frantic and loose movement of Tatsuhiro and Misaki as he battles the N.H.K. monster. However, unlike in their rooms, the stillness in the cabin is one of rest, rebirth, the “movements of heart, soul, and mind... inscribed onto [their] surfaces” (Lamarre 312). In between their movements, in the animetic intervals, are life and potential and, like Lamarre concludes, a response to the technological forces that govern our postmodern lives with a “reset” (*The Anime Machine* 321). Both characters are born anew and in doing so *Welcome to the N.H.K.* stresses that one’s nadirs are not fatal but regenerative. Just as how Kaoru’s bittersweet ending stresses holding fast to one’s identity, Tatsuhiro and Misaki’s experiences with death stress holding fast to life, to seeing the boundless potential contained within one’s self and within others.

Welcome to the N.H.K.'s ending both concludes Kaoru and Hitomi's arcs and restarts the lives of Tatsuhiro and Misaki. Kaoru has fully settled into the ranch and found a wife while Hitomi is now married with a child. Tatsuhiro now holds a job and tutors Misaki on the subjects she missed from dropping out of high school. She hands him a paper: a new contract through the "Japanese Hostage-Exchange Association," the "N.H.K." ("N-H-K" 00:21:26). It binds their lives together, stating that if one of them dies the other must, as well. Thus, they live for each other, agreeing to work through their individual problems while pledging their lives to each other. Their once-parasitic relationship is reborn as symbiotic, each depending on the other for life. Tatsuhiro thinks, "after all that we went through, none of our problems were solved," while Misaki stresses that this is "a new beginning," a chance for renewal ("N-H-K" 00:21:48-22:23). The ending of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* begins the story of Tatsuhiro and Misaki proper – the entire series reveals itself as building the foundation upon which their lives now begin. "[F]or two personalities as wounded as [Tatsuhiro] and Misaki, this is probably the best possible outcome," Hairston argues (322). *N.H.K.* concerns itself with, among many things, how we have the power to recontextualize our own lives. From Kaoru faking having a girlfriend and making the *ero*ge to Tatsuhiro and Misaki changing the N.H.K. from a negative conspiracy into an optimistic bond, the series stresses that our lives are a series of events that, though we may think are spiraling out of our control, are ultimately ours to influence and ours to dictate. It involves togetherness and collaborative creativity, it involves movement and stillness, and it involves escaping one's "cocoon" and seeing the "glimmer of hope that there may yet be a butterfly in [one's] future" (Hairston 323). Amid the advent of the hikikomori crisis, Saitō ends his book noting that we must "[attempt] to recognize and understand the issue correctly" (180). *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, airing nearly a decade after Saitō's study, extends this idea to thinking about how we work through our problems and how we help others with theirs. It is a collaborative effort, just like the process of producing anime, but it must be done in distinctly individualized ways. Tatsuhiro and Misaki's contract does not bind their lives together but their wills to live, and that difference is crucial. Living is hard, it is "painful and revealing," but we work through it together through "allowing time, space, and the re-booting of an entirely informal communication style," here presented as a homemade contract and a promise (Heinze and Thomas 167). In doing so, the series rejects complete collaboration in favour of relationships that beget a more "stable, independent, and individual self" (Heinze and Thomas 167). The series ends as Misaki looks

directly at the viewers, into Tatsuhiro's eyes, and greets them into their new life: "Welcome to the N.H.K." ("N-H-K" 00:22:26-27).

In 2005, a year before the anime of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* began, Tatsuhiko Takimoto wrote a new afterword to the original novel. He details the writer's block he experienced since first publication; however, he also notes that "[i]t's already spring. It's already warmed up. Birds come to the tree outside my window. In light of that natural cycle, a deep belief that one day, all my daily troubles will be solved boils up in my chest" (242). *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, the anime, ends on springtime, on cherry blossoms blooming, and on a promise of new beginnings. At a time of new beginnings, it asks us to reflect. On the state of Tatsuhiro Satou at the series' beginning. On Kaoru Yamazaki and his steadfast holding onto his otaku identity. On the *eroge* and its vital importance as both a symbol of the unashamed love of communal fandom and as one of the many triggers of Tatsuhiro's re-emergence. It asks us to take pride in and hold onto the lifestyles that make us who we are, and, in the process, sacrifices Kaoru's chance in Tokyo through his tragically conclusive ending. It uses suicide and desperation as catalysts for regeneration and rebirth through the offline meetup and Yuichi's extreme social withdrawal. It then makes those themes more personal through revealing Misaki's selfish intentions, their parasitic effect on her relationship with Tatsuhiro, and the resulting defeat of the "N.H.K.." All the while, the series asks viewers to consider the medium through which it tells its story. The answer to "why anime?" is the way the characters move through and sit in the world, through the collaborative processes that create anime and invite viewers to continue that movement outward. It, finally, brings us back to springtime, to rebirth and renewal, by welcoming us into the new world in which we all, like Tatsuhiro and Misaki, signed a contract. "Still, for now at least, I'm hanging in there," Tatsuhiro remarks at the conclusion, "I don't know how long it'll last, but dammit I'll give it the best I've got" ("N-H-K" 00:21:59-22:06). It is the process of that starting anew, of the promise of a new beginning, that resonates and reverberates. And that new beginning, ultimately, as Takimoto reiterates, is what *Welcome to the N.H.K.* invites us into: "Identity... Love... Existence... Space... God... The time must come, someday, when we will be granted a final answer regarding those great mysteries. With that warm feeling buried in my heart, I keep living" (242).

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