

# Hikikomori: The Need to Belong and the Activation of Narrative Collective-Assimilation through Visual Novels

BRIAN LU  
University of Chicago

This paper explores the Hikikomori condition within the broader context of general social withdrawal. This condition is related to other social withdrawal disorders through a shared social withdrawal psychology which is characterized by an unfulfilled need to belong. However, the Hikikomori condition differs from these other disorders by its extreme symptom of social isolation which is manifested most notably in Japan where prominent factors of the social and cultural environment nurture and cultivate social withdrawal psychology to bring about the Hikikomori condition. This paper then examines the concept of narrative collective-assimilation and how its activation through the medium of visual novels creates a sense of belonging which may satiate Hikikomori individuals' need to belong. This research advances the general understanding of the burgeoning Hikikomori phenomenon and recognizes the potential of visual novels as a treatment not only for Hikikomori individuals but for other socially withdrawn individuals as well.

*Keywords:* Hikikomori, social withdrawal, belonging, narrative collective-assimilation, visual novels

Cet article explore le phénomène Hikikomori dans un contexte général de retrait social. Le phénomène Hikikomori rejoint les pathologies caractérisées par une psychologie et une symptomatologie de retrait social ainsi qu'un besoin insatisfait d'appartenance sociale. Celui-ci se démarque néanmoins en raison d'un isolement social marqué qui se développe lorsqu'un ensemble important de stressés environnementaux, présent à l'intérieur même de la société japonaise, favorise une psychologie de retrait social. Ensuite, cet article fait ressortir la notion de récit collectif d'assimilation et explore la possibilité que son activation, par l'intermédiaire de romans interactifs, crée chez les individus Hikikomori un sentiment d'appartenance qui leur permet d'assouvir ce besoin. Ainsi, cette étude vise à approfondir la compréhension de ce sujet grandissant ainsi que faire ressortir le potentiel rôle des romans interactifs par rapport au traitement du phénomène Hikikomori qui pourrait s'étendre à d'autres types de conditions caractérisées par un retrait social.

*Mots-clés :* Hikikomori, retrait social, appartenance, récit collectif d'assimilation, roman interactif

Hikikomori, the Japanese word meaning “withdrawal,” has come to signify in modern culture both the condition and the people who suffer from acute social withdrawal (Saito, 1998). Hikikomori individuals remove themselves from society by shutting themselves in their rooms, venturing outside very rarely or not at all (Teo, 2009). Their social isolation results in unproductive lifestyles and minimal social contribution, which becomes a great burden on their supporting families as well as the rest

of society. Though not yet defined as a unique disorder by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), Hikikomori is well recognized by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare as a significant phenomenon affecting Japanese society. Reports estimate as many as 700,000 Hikikomori sufferers within the country, a number that may in fact be a conservative estimate due to the hidden nature of the condition (Kremer & Hammond, 2013). Although the majority of cases have been reported in Japan, Hikikomori's symptoms do extend outside the country and are beginning to receive attention in countries such as Korea, Oman, and Spain (Kato et al., 2012). In light of the growing significance of the Hikikomori phenomenon, this paper sets out, first, to explore

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how Hikikomori fits within the context of general social withdrawal – one’s isolation from a peer group (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009) – by examining how Hikikomori relates to and differs from other social withdrawal disorders. This paper then studies the concept of narrative collective-assimilation and how its activation through the medium of visual novels creates a powerful need to belong. By studying these topics, this paper illustrates how Hikikomori may satiate their need for belonging despite their characteristic isolation. This paper also formulates the use of visual novels as a possible social reentry treatment not only for Hikikomori but also for other socially withdrawn individuals.

Hikikomori is the self-imposed condition of extreme social and physical isolation. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2003) defines Hikikomori by the following five criteria: home-centered lifestyle, aversion to school or work, absence of other mental disorders such as schizophrenia, no interpersonal relationships, and social isolation lasting six months or longer. Hikikomori is the removal of all social aspects from one’s life (social activities such as school and work and interpersonal relationships with friends, significant others, and family); it is the adoption of isolation within the confines of one’s room.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th edition (DSM-IV TR; APA, 2000)* lists two general characteristics of social withdrawal disorders. Firstly, social withdrawal disorders are distinguished by social avoidance. For example, people with social phobia strongly avoid interpersonal contact. This behavior may significantly interfere with their daily lifestyle; however, only in extreme circumstances will this social avoidance lead to social and physical isolation and cause a complete discontinuation of daily activities. In addition, social withdrawal disorders are distinguished by one’s desire for acceptance and familiar bond. Though agoraphobics, for example, are anxious of situations such as crowded areas or open spaces, they can endure such stress when accompanied by a familiar companion (APA, 2000).

An examination of these formal definitions highlights an important similarity between Hikikomori and general social withdrawal – the shared symptom of social withdrawal, an avoidance of people and social interaction. Hikikomori fulfills a major criterion

of social withdrawal disorder and fits among these other conditions (Rubin et al., 2009). At the same time however, Hikikomori stands out strikingly from other social withdrawal disorders due to the severity of its withdrawal symptoms. Though social isolation is considered standard for Hikikomori (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2003), such a symptom is considered extreme for other social withdrawal disorders and only appears in severe circumstances (APA, 2000).

Taking this information into account, this article now analyzes the similarities between Hikikomori and other social withdrawal disorders in order to uncover their shared social withdrawal psychology – the cognition, motivation, and general mental state underlying the symptoms of social withdrawal. This article then investigates the particularities surrounding Hikikomori in order to understand its unique symptomatic manifestation of social withdrawal psychology.

### **The Unfulfilled Need for Belonging and the Origin of Hikikomori**

The classification of Hikikomori alongside other social withdrawal disorders suggests that they may share a common psychological cause. Examining the background shared by Hikikomori and other socially withdrawn individuals, one notes common histories of insecure parent-child relationships. Though type and degree of insecurity may vary, such insecure parental attachments are thought to stunt a child’s social development – the development of social navigation skills – and so make his or her future social interactions incredibly difficult (Hastings, Nuselovici, Rubin, & Cheah, 2010; Krieg & Dickie, 2011).

The insecure parent-child relationships of Hikikomori are characterized by a deficiency in parental involvement; few parent-child interactions (Hattori, 2006) and hardly any emotional connection (Suwa, Suzuki, Hara, Watanabe, & Takahashi, 2003). A recovering Hikikomori recalled in one interview how, upon confiding in his parents about being bullied in school, his parents told him coldly to “handle it himself” (Jones, 2006). Such parent-child relationships lacking in parental involvement fail to socially prepare the child and result in an underdevelopment of the Hikikomori’s capacity for social interaction, exploration, and navigation (Krieg & Dickie, 2011). Insecure parent-child relationships

in Hikikomori backgrounds thus fail to introduce sufficient early social experience and therefore stunt the child's social development.

Insecure parental attachments are similarly reported in non-Hikikomori social withdrawal cases. However, instead of parental under-management (a lack of interaction), these insecure parent-child relationships are characterized by over-management: parents over-control and over-protect their children and in turn create a monopoly on their child's interpersonal relationships (Erickson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1985; Rubin, Hastings, Stewart, Henderson, & Chen, 1997). Insecure parental attachment characterized by over-management of children's actions restrict their interpersonal development and social exploration (Hastings et al., 2010) and thus, as in Hikikomori cases, stunt children's social development.

Bullying is another commonly reported occurrence in socially withdrawn individuals' backgrounds. Hikikomori youth often suffer verbal and physical abuse from their peers and are excluded from social groups (Teo, 2009). Other socially withdrawn individuals report similar instances of victimization: negative judgment, peer exclusion, and lack of social acceptance (Oh et al., 2008). Such patterns of bullying reflect a history of rejection and difficult social experiences.

Now, by studying the social patterns common to Hikikomori's and other socially withdrawn individuals' backgrounds, a singular theme arises: an adverse social environment. Insecure parent-child relationships leave the youth clumsy and unskilled in social interactions while bullying causes children to become social victims. Socially withdrawn individuals face intimidating social environments in which they are made to believe that they do not belong. Examining the background of socially withdrawn individuals, one can understand that these individuals withdraw from social environments that are aversive, where they feel that they do not belong. For example, one study recorded how anxious solitary youth display social avoidance when threatened by high peer exclusion, illustrating how socially withdrawn individuals may withdraw from situations in which they are rejected and denied social acceptance (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004). Such social withdrawal behavior in response to situations that reject them points to socially withdrawn individuals' aversion to

social rejection. Indeed, Hikikomori have been documented in various interviews to express great fear of negative critique, judgment, and social failure, which consequently highlights a powerful fear of rejection (Ogino, 2004). Socially withdrawn individuals thus withdraw because of their fear of adverse social environments which are rife with the possibility of rejection (Krieg & Dickie, 2011), challenging their sense of belonging.

Consequently, social withdrawal and a fear of rejection reflects an individual's need to belong. An individual needing to belong is sensitive to rejection and so moves away from hostile situations which may threaten his or her need to belong (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Socially withdrawn individuals, avoidant persons, and people with social phobia, for example, are hypersensitive to rejection because of their great need for belonging and consequently withdraw in order to avoid rejection (APA, 2000). Thus, social withdrawal psychology stems from an unsatisfied need to belong; the *DSM-IV TR* notes how socially withdrawn individuals, despite their withdrawn situation, still desire acceptance and need to belong (APA, 2000). As Maslow (1943) describes in his motivational hierarchy, love and belonging are basic human needs; all people, withdrawn individuals included, desire human relations and need a place within the social world. Therefore, when met with an adverse social environment, the powerful need to belong conflicts with the negative experiences of rejection, and as a consequence the socially withdrawn individual withdraws. Social withdrawal psychology thus is characterized by an individual's unfulfilled need to belong, symptomatically manifested as social withdrawal in order to reduce experiences of rejection in an adverse social environment (APA, 2000). Consequently Hikikomori fits well within the context of general social withdrawal (APA, 2000; Rubin et al., 2009). Hikikomori and other social withdrawal disorders share not only the same general withdrawal symptoms but also the same social withdrawal psychology.

Despite this shared psychology, Hikikomori's extreme symptom of acute social isolation markedly distinguishes Hikikomori from other social withdrawal disorders. This difference in severity of symptoms between disorders raises the following question: what causes social withdrawal psychology to manifest as Hikikomori, to express itself as extreme social

isolation? Though not a culturally specific disorder, Japan has a high amount of reports and studies about Hikikomori (Kato et al., 2012), and hence the unique set of characteristics prominently found in Japan's social and cultural setting may hold answers concerning the extreme social isolation of Hikikomori. These features of Japan's culture and society – mainstream expectations for individual success, a mindset of retreat, and behavior enabling social withdrawal – may encourage social withdrawal psychology to express itself as symptoms of Hikikomori and consequently create in Japan an environment especially conducive to Hikikomori manifestation.

Mainstream expectations of Japanese culture and society place immense pressure on Japanese youth by outlining rigorous definitions of success in education and employment. In order to achieve educational success for example, a youth must follow a designated, structured path – primary school, junior high school, high school, and then university (Fujita, 2007). This progression towards university graduation marks the accepted pathway to employment and so holds not just great cultural gravity but social significance too. A youth's educational success is thus determined by how closely he or she adheres to this traditional educational path; and this strict definition of success in turn creates great pressure on young people to fulfill these social expectations.

The Japanese employment system likewise generates great social pressure on the country's youth through its long-term employment system, recently reinforced by asymmetric labor market changes (Kosugi & Hori, 2003; Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2011). The long-term employment system creates an incredibly stressful situation of one-shot recruitment in which youth must find employment immediately after university or else they will have great difficulty entering the workforce later on (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2011). This long-term employment system thus burdens the youth with great expectations and practically only one chance to fulfill them – which creates stress about their present and future. Exemplified by the Japanese education and employment system, mainstream expectations burden the youth with great pressures to conform not only in the present but also in the future, and not just to their peers but also to society at large. Strict requirements for achieving cultural and social acceptance create a seemingly inescapable adverse social environment for

socially withdrawn individuals. These expectations expand the threat of rejection from the local environment of the family and friends to society at large, encouraging in socially withdrawn individuals a powerful fear of the future and society.

The mindset of retreat is the Japanese cultural ideology of preserving social harmony by retreating rather than rising when one's self and society are in conflict. In this mindset, society takes precedence over the individual, and this is generally reflected in Japanese individuals' interdependent self-construal, where one recognizes oneself in relationship with others and mostly as part of society at large (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This mindset thus promotes withdrawal by establishing it to be culturally appropriate and favorable to retreat from social conflicts such as social rejection (Lebra, 1984). An anecdotal interview with a Hikikomori demonstrates the importance of preserving social harmony even from a young age: the Hikikomori's parents told their child, "You must have reasons to be blamed... Stay away from them, and they will not harm you" (Hattori, 2006). The mindset of retreat thus promotes and advocates social withdrawal as the appropriate solution to social conflict; this cultural ideology of retreat furthermore foments social isolation, for if one is at conflict with greater society, the viable solution then would be to withdraw from society itself – to socially isolate oneself.

The enabling behaviors of *futoko* and *amae* also encourage the onset and continuation of Hikikomori. *Futoko*, which means "school refusal" in Japanese, is the refusal to attend school for a short period of time and it is common across Hikikomori's backgrounds (Saitō, 2002). It functions as a test trial for future Hikikomori by allowing an individual to temporarily experience dropping out from school and self-isolating. *Futoko* makes the individual aware of the possibility of refusing his social duties and introduces him or her to the concept and experience of school and social withdrawal – thus seeding the first stirrings of Hikikomori. *Amae* – the parental tolerance of a child's dependency – promotes not only the onset, but also the continuation, of Hikikomori (Doi, 1973). Common across Hikikomori backgrounds, *amae* behavior foments a child's dependency on a parent by allowing the child to expect to be supported financially (Doi, 1973). Such behavior facilitates both the onset and continuation of Hikikomori by allowing an individual to expect parental indulgence throughout

isolation while the parents tolerate his or her behavior. For example, though many Hikikomori possess no source of income, parents yielding to *amae* behavior facilitates their child's continued isolation by providing financial support, housing, and food. (Jones, 2006). Enabling behaviors such as *futoko* and *amae* thus encourage Hikikomori by promoting its beginning and nurturing its continuation.

In summary, a unique set of characteristics of the Japanese environment encourages social withdrawal psychology to manifest as Hikikomori. An individual's need to belong, his or her fear of rejection, conflicts with the great and pervasive social adversity created by mainstream expectations. Withdrawal is not only encouraged by a cultural mindset of retreat but is also facilitated to degenerate into isolation through the enabling behaviors of *futoko* and *amae*. These various environmental characteristics nurture social withdrawal psychology to symptomatically manifest as Hikikomori; and in turn, the prominence of these characteristics create within Japan an environment conducive to Hikikomori's manifestation.

Now, as social withdrawal manifests as Hikikomori what then of the motivation underlying the symptoms, the unfulfilled need to belong? The need remains unfulfilled, strong and persistent. Socially withdrawn individuals, though withdrawn from social situations, still desire acceptance and need to belong (APA, 2000). After all, the persistence of the symptoms reflects an awareness of the unfulfilled need to belong. One can find support for this in a study demonstrating that dismissive-avoidant individuals, despite being adverse to forming or maintaining social relationships, reacted affirmatively to positive social feedback by expressing high positive affect and self-esteem upon social inclusion; despite their apparent aversion to social interaction, these individuals still do need to belong (Cavallo & Gabriel, 2006). Therefore in spite of their withdrawn, isolated state, Hikikomori continue to feel the need to belong and their social withdrawal psychology persists. How then could Hikikomori satiate their unfulfilled need to belong in spite of their isolation?

The answer may lie in a narrative experienced through the medium of visual novels. To investigate this theory and to identify how visual novels may satiate Hikikomori's need for belonging, the following conceptual and material groundwork must first be

established: the concept of narrative collective-assimilation, its function, and its activating components, as well as a definition of visual novel and an explanation of the medium. Lastly, this article explores how various aspects of visual novels facilitate narrative collective-assimilation and so provide Hikikomori with a sense of belonging.

### **Narrative Collective-Assimilation**

Narrative collective-assimilation is the process in which the experience of a narrative causes one to psychologically assimilate into the narrative's group and consequently gain a sense of belonging. Narrative collective-assimilation can thus be broken down into two processes: assimilation into a narrative's collective and increase the sense of belonging.

Narrative collective-assimilation (NCA) first states that when one experiences a narrative, one assimilates into a collective, a social group presented in that narrative (Gabriel & Young, 2011). One study, for example, showed that participants who read *Harry Potter* identified more as wizards while those who read *Twilight* identified more as vampires, illustrating how participants assimilate into the collective which was presented in the narrative they experienced (Gabriel & Young, 2011).

Narrative collective-assimilation secondly states that through assimilation into a narrative's collective, one gains a sense of belonging (Gabriel & Young, 2011). Gabriel and Young (2011) support this finding through their *Harry Potter/Twilight* study in which participants who sought more strongly to fulfill their need to belong through participation in a real-life collective also showed higher assimilation into a narrative's collective. In other words, engagement in a real-life collective predicts assimilation into a narrative's collective, suggesting that NCA can satisfy one's sense of belonging similarly to an actual collective. Gabriel and Young's (2011) study also reports how, in response to NCA, participants demonstrate an increase in positive mood and life satisfaction, primary affective responses to belonging, further demonstrating NCA's ability to create a feeling of belonging in narrative-consumers. Additionally, a study on familiar television narratives illustrates how narrative collective-assimilation provides the narrative-consumer with a sense of belonging through its promotion of social surrogacy, a socially rewarding one-sided interpersonal interaction

(Derrick, 2013; Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2008).

Thus, narrative collective-assimilation takes place when an individual experiences a narrative and the person assimilates into one of the narrative's collectives, feeling part of one of the story's social groups; the effects of this assimilation are powerful, similar to those derived from assimilation into a real-life collective, and the assimilated individual gains a satiated sense of belonging.

There are three components which activate narrative collective-assimilation: a collective, identification with characters, and transportation. The first component of NCA is a collective, a social group within the narrative which one can assimilate into. Wizards, a social group prominently featured in *Harry Potter*, are an example of such a collective. A narrative must feature a collective in order to activate NCA, because without a collective, there can be no assimilation at all.

The second component of NCA is identification – the process of psychological overlap between the narrative-consumer's self and a character's self, such that they unify (Sestir & Green, 2010) and the consumer begins to vicariously live through the character, reacting to his or her experiences on a personal and affective level (Noy, 1993; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Thus, as identification allows a narrative-consumer to gain a character's perspective and participate in the narrative's collective, it is a powerful activator of narrative collective-assimilation. For example, in Gabriel's and Young's (2011) study, participants who identified themselves as wizards assimilated into *Harry Potter's* wizard collective whereas those identifying as vampires assimilated into *Twilight's* vampire collective.

NCA's third component is transportation – the process by which a media-consumer becomes emotionally and cognitively immersed into the setting of a narrative (Chatham, Green, & Sestir, 2010; Green & Brock, 2000). When one becomes transported, one's reactions to in-narrative changes firstly become less negative; additionally these reactions become more affective than cognitive. As such, the narrative's environment, the characters, and the plot feel more real and have a larger impact on the transported individual (Escalas, 2007). By immersing the

consumer deeper into the narrative and collective and by adding a layer of realism, transportation creates powerful connections between the consumer and the characters of the story's collective (Green, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000) and thus facilitates the activation of narrative collective-assimilation.

These three components – a collective, identification with characters, and transportation – facilitate assimilation into a collective and subsequently the increase in sense of belonging. Consequently, if a narrative promotes these components, it will robustly activate narrative collective-assimilation and instill within the narrative-consumer a strong sense of belonging. Such a narrative may take form in the medium of visual novels. Visual novels' unique characteristics powerfully activate NCA by promoting its key components, and in turn visual novels provide Hikikomori the comfort of belonging despite isolation.

### Visual Novels

Visual novels are a digital narrative-based medium featuring interactive decision-making gameplay – much like that of choose-your-own-adventure books – which allows the player to decide how the visual novel progresses and eventually how the visual novel will end. Visual novels' stories vary with the choices the player makes in each playthrough and so each story holds a unique plot and multiple possible endings. The stories of visual novels are communicated mostly via textual narration and dialogue and are complemented by audio and digital imagery. A player simultaneously plays and reads through the story by clicking, each click progressing the narrative one step forward. One click, for example, might display a character's next line of dialogue and another click might trigger a new character's entrance. One could thus understand a visual novel as an interactive power-point presentation, but instead of a lecture or speech, the presentation communicates a narrative through visuals which show settings and characters, text which displays dialogue and narration, and audio which provides music and sound effects. Additionally, there are multiple possible paths that the narrative can take based on the player's choices.

Before studying how visual novels' characteristics may activate narrative collective-assimilation's components and consequently provide a sense of belonging to Hikikomori, one must first understand

*why* this paper theorizes that the medium of visual novels could deliver a sense of belonging to Hikikomori.

Previous research has shown that socially withdrawn individuals find in media a source of belonging. For example, a study on nomophobia – the anxiety produced through the non-availability of a virtual communication device – reveals that participants with social phobia display symptoms of nomophobia not because of their dependence to the devices themselves, but rather to their dependence on the safe and mediated social interaction offered by the devices (King et al., 2013). In the same way that people with social phobia are likely to depend on communication devices for safe social interaction, Hikikomori too may rely on a medium to substitute for social relationships. That medium then could be visual novels due to their wild popularity in Japan: visual novels made up nearly 70% of all PC games sales in 2006, hefty sales in themselves (Aoshi, 2006). Their wide accessibility and popularity may therefore grant them the high probability of reaching and affecting Hikikomori, production of a feeling of belonging.

### **Satiating the Need to Belong: Visual Novels and the Activation of Narrative Collective-Assimilation**

Visual novels' individual characteristics – minimal mechanics, auditory environment, static graphics, first-person point of view, and interactive decision-making gameplay – facilitate narrative collective-assimilation by activating its key components: a collective, identification with characters, and transportation into a collective. By facilitating these individual components, visual novels activate narrative collective-assimilation and so create in Hikikomori a sense of belonging.

**Minimal mechanics.** Due to visual novels' minimal mechanics – text and still images with only clicking controls – a visual novel's narrative is restricted almost solely to character interaction (Barnholt, 2009). The medium allows for little to no action so the story must be told through interpersonal interaction. Visual novels inherently feature a pervasive collective within their narratives which centers gameplay around the consumer's strong participation within that collective.

**Auditory environment.** Visual novels promote identification with characters through the employment of an auditory environment composed of music and sound effects. Music aptly communicates emotion through its tonal structures which construct an analogy of human feelings (Noy, 1993). A visual novel's music therefore communicates to the player a character's mood and feelings, helping the player to emotionally connect and identify with that character. Similarly, sound effects such as the creak of a door or the rush of a sudden breeze foster identification with characters by providing auditory insight into a character's real time experiences. By allowing the player and the character to hear the same thing at the same time, a visual novel permits a player to gain a character's auditory perspective, bridging the physical distance between player and character and so cultivating bodily identification.

A visual novels' auditory environment also facilitates transportation. As music communicates emotion (Noy, 1993), it thus can communicate the mood of a narrative's setting. This in turn helps the player understand the narrative's setting at an affective level and transports him or her into the emotional environment of the visual novel. In addition, sound effects allow a player to gain an auditory sense of the narrative's physical world by relaying real-time narrative events through sound. The player experiences and hears a visual novel's environment and thus promote transportation into the narrative. In summary, by using sound to communicate mood and real-time information about the narrative's characters and settings, a visual novel's auditory environment promotes the player's identification with characters and transportation.

**Static graphics.** Static graphics perform the narrative's visual storytelling, depicting characters and settings. By visually communicating the narrative's setting, static graphics facilitate the player's transportation. For example, a literature review on videogame narratives particularly notes how a game's visuals strongly affect a player and thus promote transportation (Lu, Baranowski, Thompson, & Buday, 2012). By visually depicting characters and settings through still images, a visual novel gives the player a visual summary of the narrative's environment, a snapshot which allows him or her to react affectively to the narrative's world. Also, by remaining unchanging, static graphics allow the player to focus on a single scene and become visually familiar and

immersed into the narrative's setting. By prompting affective responses to a narrative's world and by allowing the player to become familiar with the setting, visual novels' static graphics promote one's transportation into the narrative's world.

**1<sup>st</sup> person point-of-view.** Visual novels implement a 1<sup>st</sup> person point-of-view which allows the player to experience the narrative from the protagonist's perspective. Game characters, for example, appear on the screen looking out towards the player and create the illusion of 1<sup>st</sup> person interaction and face-to-face conversation. By gaining the protagonist's visual perspective, the player consequently becomes physically similar to the character, physically identifying as the protagonist through a shared sight. Additionally, 1<sup>st</sup> person point-of-view allows the player to identify with the protagonist at an emotional level. For example, in a study comparing participants' perceptions of 1<sup>st</sup> person narratives versus 3<sup>rd</sup> person narratives, participants reported that they connected more affectively and emotionally with the protagonist when they read the story through a 1<sup>st</sup> person point-of-view rather than through a 3<sup>rd</sup> person point-of-view (Banerjee & Greene, 2012). A 1<sup>st</sup> person point-of-view therefore motivates a player to gain not only the protagonist's physical perspective but also the protagonist's emotional perspective, consequently fostering a player's robust identification.

**Interactive decision-making.** Visual novels' interactive decision-making gameplay allows the player to make choices for and as the protagonist during certain plot points within the narrative. This interactive decision-making gameplay places the player right in the character's shoes and allows the player's and the character's selves to become one, fomenting the player's physical identification with the protagonist. Additionally, decision-making gameplay allows the player to choose the protagonist's dialogue during conversations with other characters. Such interactive gameplay heightens the simulation of a player's participation in social interaction and interpersonal relationships which in turn stimulates the player's social identification with the protagonist.

Decision-making gameplay furthermore promotes identification with characters through its creation of a variety of playable endings crafted from a player's choices throughout the storyline. These varying endings can be subjectively good or bad: a bad ending in the visual novel *School Days* results in the death of

one of the protagonist's love interests. One might intuitively believe that such bad endings would counteract narrative collective-assimilation by lessening the player's desire to identify with the protagonist or by destroying the sense of a collective. However, reactions to events become affectively less negative and more positive when experienced through the lens of narrative. That is, narratives buffer against negative emotions (Escalas, 2004). In addition, bad endings in visual novels may in fact foment narrative collective-assimilation by facilitating strong identification. Indeed, the experience of bad endings firstly promotes identification with the protagonist by allowing the player to connect with him or her not just through positive experiences but also through negative ones (Jagoda, 2013). Hence, bad endings act as another dimension by which the player can understand and become familiar with the protagonist; creating a more in-depth and complex connection between player and protagonist, bad endings of visual novels strengthen a player's identification with the protagonist.

Bad endings can also increase identification with the protagonist by encouraging replay. Upon experiencing a bad ending, a player may feel the desire to erase the negative feelings of "losing" by replaying the game from the beginning or a save point in order to "win" and reach a good ending. Replaying the game allows the player to spend more time with the protagonist and introduces new experiences with the character via the exploration of different narrative pathways, scenes, and settings. Through additional time spent with the character, bad endings create a closer connection between the player and the protagonist and thus strengthen identification the main character. Visual novels' interactive decision-making gameplay therefore facilitates identification with the protagonist by the bond cultivated through choice and by the experience gained from bad endings.

Visual novels are clearly a medium featuring prominent and strong collectives and highly conducive to activating one's identification with the story's characters and transportation into the novel's narrative. Visual novels therefore are especially powerful activators of narrative collective-assimilation and grant players a strong sense of belonging. In light of their popularity in Japan and of the relationship of socially withdrawn individuals with media, visual novels may thus answer how Hikikomori could satiate their need for belonging in spite of their isolation.



### Discussion

Prominently reported in Japan, Hikikomori is a social withdrawal condition characterized by its extreme symptom of acute social isolation lasting more than six months. An examination of Hikikomori's and other socially withdrawn individuals' shared backgrounds – insecure parent-child relationships and bullying – reveals how Hikikomori fits within the classification of social withdrawal. These disorders all share the same underlying social withdrawal psychology: the unfulfilled need to belong. Faced with an adverse social environment, Hikikomori and other socially withdrawn individuals withdraw because of their fear of rejection and powerful need to belong.

Hikikomori stands out from other social withdrawal conditions for its extreme symptom of social isolation. In fact, an investigation of Japan's social and cultural environment illustrates how Hikikomori manifests itself when social withdrawal psychology is cultivated by a particular set of characteristics – expectations of success, a mindset of retreat and withdrawal enabling behavior – prominent within the Japanese setting. These characteristics encourage social withdrawal psychology's symptomatic expression as Hikikomori and create in Japan an environment especially conducive to its manifestation.

Realizing that Hikikomori maintain the need to belong during isolation, an exploration of the concept of narrative collective-assimilation and the medium of visual novels demonstrates how Hikikomori may satiate their need for belonging despite their isolation. Narrative collective-assimilation states that when an individual experiences a narrative and assimilates it into one of the narrative's presented collectives, the individual gains a sense of belonging. Visual novels in turn induce powerful narrative collective-assimilation due to their unique set of characteristics – auditory environment, static graphics, first-person perspective, and decision-making game play – which promotes the key activating components of NCA (a collective, identification with characters, and transportation). Thus, visual novels, through robust activation of narrative collective-assimilation, create in their players a strong sense of belonging. Moreover, due to socially withdrawn individuals' dependency on media and the popularity of visual novels in Japan, visual novels provide the medium for narratives by which Hikikomori may satiate their need for belonging.

### Potential Treatment for Social Withdrawal

Up until now, this article has discussed visual novels as a method by which Hikikomori may find a sense of belonging while remaining in isolation. One may thus perceive visual novels as medium which encourages Hikikomori to persist in their isolation by granting players a one-sided experience of social belonging. Indeed, perhaps the purely recreational visual novels made for the mainstream market do in fact aggravate and promote Hikikomori's further isolation; the aspects of this possibly negative phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail later in the *Limitations* section. However, this article presents the concept of treatment-oriented visual novels, visual novels are specifically crafted to foster social preparation and social reintegration in Hikikomori through recreational gameplay.

Firstly, during the early stages of treatment, visual novels could prove to be more effective than human effort in engaging the individuals in treatment because while Hikikomori are averse to social interaction and may resist attempts of human contact, they may accept visual novels due to their safe mediation and creation of a sense of belonging. Hikikomori may thus reach out to and interact with visual novels without resistance. And in this way, visual novels may act as a viable method for initiating Hikikomori's treatment of social reentry.

To understand how visual novels may initiate a Hikikomori's social reentry, one must first recognize that visual novels are a gamification of social interaction and therefore a tool for social preparation. Gamification is the employment of a game structure on a non-game activity in order to improve one's engagement and problem solving skills within this non-game context (Jagoda, 2013). This means organizing an activity around the positive aspects of winning, the negative aspects of losing, and the beautiful aspects of art of games. Visual novels' gameplay rewards well navigated interpersonal interactions with good endings, punishes poorly navigated relationships with bad endings, and artistically expresses social experience through music, imagery, and narrative. The medium of visual novels thus functions as a gamification of social interaction, and engages Hikikomori players in mediated social interaction, teaching them social problem-solving skills and acting as a powerful tool for social preparation.

By socially preparing Hikikomori, visual novels may in turn facilitate a transition between virtual and human-based treatment. This general theory follows that of “rental sisters” used by New Start, a Hikikomori rehabilitation program in Japan. New Start initiates treatment of Hikikomori with “rental sisters,” girls whose purpose is to begin the Hikikomori’s reentry into society by establishing first contact with the Hikikomori and giving him or her a positive first impression of social interaction (Jones, 2006). Though aimed to establish first contact with Hikikomori, many “rental sisters” have trouble with even this initial task due to the Hikikomori’s intense aversion to human interaction (Jones, 2006). In such cases, visual novels could prove incredibly useful, first initiating contact with Hikikomori without resistance and then establishing first human interaction with greater ease by gradually transferring the treatment into a rental sister’s hands. Visual novels specifically tailored for treatment could function as mediated versions of rental sisters, establishing first connections with the outside world and introducing positive social interaction to the Hikikomori through narrative and game characters. Visual novels would then progressively connect the digital world to the real one using alternate reality game (ARG) mechanics (gameplay which carefully and gradually requires more of the player’s social involvement), transforming mediated social interaction into real social interaction and thus facilitating Hikikomori’s reentrance to society.

### Limitations

One limitation with the idea of using visual novels as treatment for Hikikomori is that even though visual novels may provide socially withdrawn individuals with a sense of belonging and engage them in mediated social interactions, visual novels by themselves do not function as complete treatments of social withdrawal. The safety of their mediated social interaction and the satiation provided by their sense of belonging may, in fact, encourage one to remain within the comfort zone of isolation rather than move into society. And so, though useful for reaching out to and impacting Hikikomori, visual novels’ creation of a satiating sense of belonging may inadvertently encourage further isolation, as satiated individuals will no longer feel a need to engage in real interpersonal interaction and instead remain isolated. By crafting visual novels for the specific purpose of social reentry treatment however, inadvertent encouragement of

isolation can be counteracted through careful application of alternate reality game mechanics. ARG mechanics promote a player’s engagement with the social world by extending gameplay into real world settings with real world people (Kim, Lee, Thomas, & Dombrowski, 2009), shifting the source of belonging into a social setting and so encouraging Hikikomori’s social reentry. Thus, though visual novels on their own may not be sufficient or beneficial for fostering social reintegration, when accompanied by close cooperation of human factors and transitional mechanics which extend digital gameplay into the real world, visual novels may function as effective treatments for social withdrawal.

Another limitation with this research is that it seems relevant only to the specific niche of Hikikomori. Yet, though Hikikomori stands out for its extreme symptoms of acute social isolation, it is still a social withdrawal disorder and relates to other disorders through their shared social withdrawal psychology. For this reason, visual novel treatment is far from being solely useful for Hikikomori and may be used to treat various other socially withdrawn individuals such as avoidant persons or people with social phobia.

Visual novels present a new possible treatment method for Hikikomori through their ability to facilitate social reentry; visual novels establish first contact with Hikikomori without resistance, socially prepare the individuals, and then transition them into further treatment involving human interaction. Since Hikikomori is comparable to other social withdrawal conditions through their shared underlying psychology, such visual novel treatment may present a novel technique of treatment for social withdrawal.

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