

Social Problems through Contemporary Culture: The Portrayal of Hikikomori in Japanese Anime



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Introduction

In recent years, Japanese society has witnessed the birth of several social problems. One of the main problems that the country, whose population of post-war baby-boomers is slowly reaching retirement age, is facing is a great decline in the birth rate. On top of that, many young people are unwilling or unable to reach the economical haven of permanent employment in a large company, and work as part-timers, also called *freeters*, or are jobless altogether. Two of the more extreme categories are the ones that completely shut off from society and retreat in their room, the so-called *hikikomori*, and secondly the group of youngsters that succumb to the pressure in a way that makes them choose to commit suicide.

However, it is the *hikikomori* that, to me, seem the most interesting; they, as Toivonen argues, are a group that choose not to loudly rebel or take their own lives, but rebel in a more silent, more "Japanese" way, while resisting the current society¹. While exact numbers are not available, the popular estimate is that around one million young people in Japan are currently in a social withdrawn - a *hikikomori* - state². While I mentioned the word group, there is no direct communication between these people that would cause them to retreat together; it is at all times a private choice, usually to protect oneself. It is the huge number that makes them a group, or better; a phenomenon.

Hikikomori is a problem that has been around in Japan for around three decades, though became more well-known in Japan only after it reached the news in the late nineties, and accelerated by the release of Saitō Tamaki's book on the matter. Over time, these people have received much negative attention, being connected to crimes and deemed dormant criminals, or simply called lazy. The problems these withdrawn young people struggle with, are however often defined by shame and fear, and caused by bullying and social pressure. Perhaps this view is slowly changing, but the actual causes of what makes all these people retreat, often outside of the control of the patient, are still not publicly recognized, according to some Japanese whom I

¹ Toivonen 2011

² Saitō 2013, Zielenziger 2006

met there and who are working with many of these *hikikomori*-patients and their families. As these people are socially withdrawn and usually don't interact with anyone outside their immediate family, as well as the common practice for families to keep cases of *hikikomori* hidden from the outside, it is a difficult topic to research.

It is for these reasons that I have chosen to approach the social image of *hikikomori* in Japan from a different angle; an angle that, you might say, has introduced me to the topic of *hikikomori* initially, and has continued to pique my interest ever since. Anime, along with other elements of Japanese popular culture like manga, games, music and all its related products, has been a tremendous part of Japanese society for the past half century. Every year, numerous games, dozens of anime and a wide variety of manga are released onto the Japanese market, and in recent years, the West has also been importing these works for their own consumption. The influence of these popular media on Japanese society has evidently not been small, and more and more research is being done on these anime and manga in academic literature every year.

Japanese popular culture like anime has covered a wide variety of topics and genres, and the target audience is, consequently, likewise widespread. It is therefore no surprise that the topic of *hikikomori* has also been adapted into anime. While most of these adaptations place the matter of the *hikikomori* in a side-role, simply recognising their existence in society, some anime have chosen to make the social problem of *hikikomori* their main story. One of the most well-known anime on this topic is the 2006 anime *Welcome to the N.H.K!* The protagonist is a former college student, now 3 years a *hikikomori*, who hates his situation and occasionally tries to get out, but fails most of the time. Still, the curious thing to me was that in this anime, a *hikikomori* was put in quite a negative light, usually he himself being the cause of all his problems, and this negative tone seemed to reappear with most other *hikikomori* characters in anime and manga I had encountered up until then.

This is why the 2014 anime *No Game No Life* so surprised me, as a completely different view on *hikikomori* was introduced to me. In this series the *hikikomori* protagonists blame the

outside world for their condition and, evidently, when brought to a different society they are able to flourish as individuals. And since, more anime seem to show similar views on the problems surrounding *hikikomori*. It was this different image that has caused me to wonder to what extent this change in portrayal of *hikikomori* in anime and other popular culture, is a reflection of how the view of Japanese society towards *hikikomori* is changing.

Is the way *hikikomori* are portrayed in Japanese popular culture different, or perhaps even more positive, than we can find described in academic literature? This is the question I will try to answer through this thesis. I would like to find out to what extent that what is displayed in anime on *hikikomori* is different, be it lagging behind or thinking ahead, on what both Japanese and Western scholars have written on the topic over the years, as well as how the mind-set towards *hikikomori* has changed over the past two decades on both fields.

In this thesis I will compare the academic literature on *hikikomori* and its development in Japanese society on the one hand and the portrayal of *hikikomori* in aforementioned anime on the other hand. In chapter one I will summarize the current research done on *hikikomori* in Japan and in the west, with a focus on how *hikikomori* are seen by both scholars as well as Japanese society. I will end the chapter by producing a timeline of how the awareness of *hikikomori* has developed. In chapter two I will analyse *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life* as representatives of the change in portrayal of *hikikomori* in anime over the past decade, while also giving a brief overview of other series featuring *hikikomori* characters during this time period. In chapter three I will then compare the findings from the previous chapters and elaborate on them with my personal experience with *hikikomori* and their families while in Japan. To close the third chapter I will argue how it is important to see Japanese popular culture as a mirror of Japanese society, and how this research may be important to understand how this social problem is developing.

Chapter 1: Explaining the *Hikikomori* Phenomenon

As this thesis will research how *hikikomori* are represented in Modern Japanese Culture, more specifically in *anime*, it is prudent that we first understand the actual phenomenon, as well as the scope of the problem in Japan. It is important to note that the research on the *hikikomori*-phenomenon is still incomplete and ongoing, and there are contradicting opinions among various scholars and scientists on the subject. However, I will try to sketch the situation as clearly and abundantly as possible, so that you may better understand the implications you will later see in the *anime* portraying these *hikikomori*. What is actually happening in Japan? And what has caused this situation to remain as it is for over two decades?

How are Hikikomori commonly defined?

In order to properly understand what the *hikikomori*-phenomenon -or even a *hikikomori* person- is, we need to define what exactly we mean when we talk about *hikikomori*. To begin, it is useful to go back to the first notions of *hikikomori* in literature, spearheaded by clinical psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki. In his book *Shakaiteki Hikikomori*, released in 1998, and later translated into *Hikikomori - Adolescence without End* (2013) by Jeffrey Angles, Saitō refers to the mental illness as the titular ‘*shakaiteki hikikomori*’ or ‘social withdrawal’ in English. *Hikikomori* is a Japanese compound word consisting of the verbs *hiku* (to pull) and *komoru* (to seclude; to be confined). The definition that Saitō gives in his book is as follows:

A state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participate in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source.³

While this may be an early definition made by Saitō personally in a book that, while based on clinical experience and scientific research, was aimed at a general audience, it has become the basis of the later designated criteria of a *hikikomori* by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare:

³ Saitō 2013, p.24

(1) a lifestyle centered at home; (2) no interest or willingness to attend school or work; (3) symptom duration of at least 6 months; (4) schizophrenia, mental retardation, or other mental disorders have been excluded; (5) among those with no interest or willingness to attend school or work, those who maintain personal relationships (e.g., friendships) have been excluded.⁴

In both definitions mental disorders are strictly excluded, implying that the cause of the problem lies elsewhere. Connections to the so-called N.E.E.T. (Not in Education, Employment or Training) are also made by Heinze and Thomas, calling *hikikomori* “N.E.E.T.s, without economic status, who encapsulate themselves at home for at least six months and have no social contact outside their immediate family.”

The word *hikikomori* is used in many ways. Originally Saitō used it as a description of a state that his patients were in. However, over time, the word has become a synonym for the people who ‘suffer’ this state. As I have based my thesis on the works of many different scholars, I, too, will use the word *hikikomori* as person, adjective and mental state at the same time.

What are their numbers?

Where exact numbers on the amount of *hikikomori*-cases in Japan are unfortunately not available, many estimates have been made over the years based on research and surveys. One of the original estimates made by Saitō in 1998, based on his experience in the field, is that there may be over one million *hikikomori*-cases in Japan. Michael Zielenziger also claims a number of over one million people in his book⁵. Actual surveys done by the Japanese government in 2011 suggest that at least a quarter million and up to 700.000 people in Japan can be considered in a *hikikomori*-state⁶ of whom a third is female. In another study presented by Cole 1.27% of

⁴ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare translated in Cole 2013, p. 30

⁵ Zielenziger 2006, p.16

⁶ Cabinet Office 2011; Heinze & Thomas 2014, pp.156-157

the 127 million population experienced *hikikomori* presently and 2.50% had experienced *hikikomori* in the past⁷.

The difficulty with the actual numbers is that most of the people suffering the *hikikomori*-state are, evidently, withdrawn and are therefore usually unable to take part in such a survey, as well as the fact that it is considered a shameful thing to be socially withdrawn in Japan, and is often hushed. Also, the participants in the actual age category of the *hikikomori* are the least represented in these surveys, as they do not participate⁸. I will elaborate more on this later in this chapter, but what we can take from this is that the actual number of over one million people suffering from *hikikomori* may very well be quite realistic. Taking into consideration that Japan is an aging society, with the baby-boom generation entering retirement age, these numbers become all the more alarming.

Causes of *hikikomori*

But what is it that is causing all these *hikikomori*-cases to manifest? How come so many youths decide to withdraw themselves from society? The answer is not a simple one, and one can even say that it is a case-by-case answer. Even so, there are some common elements visible that lead to manifestation and sustenance of *hikikomori*-patients. The overall causes of someone withdrawing him- or herself can roughly be divided into the following categories: bullying, shame, social pressure and expectations, lack of motivation and lack of alternatives.

Bullying is a huge problem in Japan. *Ijime*, as it is called in Japanese, is a common social problem in Japan, where both in schools and on the work floor people are taunted and abused by their peers. According to Cole, Borovoy, Zielenziger and Saitō, many *hikikomori* have histories of bullying. In cases where this happens in late primary or secondary schools, it can often lead to *futōkō*, or ‘school withdrawal syndrome’, where youngsters frequently refuse to go to school, often for extended periods of time⁹. Indeed, as Saitō describes, *hikikomori* is

⁷ Cole 2013, p.32

⁸ Cole 2013, p.33

⁹ Cole 2013, p.37; Borovoy 2008, pp. 553-554

very often, though definitely not always, preceded by refusal to go to school¹⁰. Bullying can also appear later in life, for example when entering the workplace after graduating university, leading more directly to social withdrawal amongst people in their early twenties.

A big problem with the bullying in Japan, as compared to Western countries, argued by Zielenziger, is that there are hardly any countermeasures towards bullying. As the early childhood is considered a playground in which social structure is formed, according to Zielenziger, teachers often leave bullying alone, not interfering or mediating at all, as it could interrupt the group-formation among the children. Parents also tend to refrain from getting involved when their child is getting bullied. While in Europe or the U.S. it is common that a mother pressures the teacher or principal to keep a better eye on their child, a Japanese mother will hardly ever do so. On the contrary, she will rather blame the child, asking him/her what he/she did to get bullied. This bullying, whilst existing in many cultures, is ‘surprisingly intense’ in Japan, with in 1994 up to 54% of elementary school students being bullied and those consequently refusing to go to school missed an average of eighteen months to two years of school¹¹.

According to Saitō, both bullying and school refusal often cause people in *hikikomori*-state to have a fear of others. However, this is not just plain *anthropophobia*, but a variety of fears like the fear of emitting body odour (bromidrophobia), fear of blushing in front of others (erythrophobia) or just plainly being afraid of neighbours looking at them¹². It is perhaps this that Cole surmises is part of the Japanese sense of shame or *haji*. According to Cole, the Japanese are especially susceptible to ‘the fear of being evaluated and misunderstood in society’. As Japan is a cultural homogenous society, the peer pressure of being evaluated by the people around you is far stronger there than in the West. As a result, the experience of extreme cases of shame, through bullying for example or through the inability to adapt to society or perform at school or work, may cause young people to drown in their shame, as they ‘fail to navigate and

¹⁰ Saitō 2013, p.33

¹¹ Zielenziger 2006, pp. 51-52

¹² Saitō 2013, pp. 37-38

manage social demands surrounding shame and conforming social behaviour', they are 'particularly prone to develop syndromes resembling social phobia, such as [...] *hikikomoria*', according to Cole¹³.

Social pressure, particularly to perform according to the norms set in Japan, is indeed another well-mentioned cause of *hikikomori*. As Zielenziger puts it, Japan's society is a 'well-oiled conveyor belt that carries young boys from preschool through college, then deposits them directly onto the workplace'¹⁴. A neo-Confucian society 'which preaches the importance of obedience, discipline, self-inhibition, and group harmony,' he elaborates. Zielenziger holds the opinion that it is this society that may be at fault for causing so many cases of *hikikomori*. Similarly, in an article on youth in globalizing Japan, Tuukka Toivonen argues how young adults are likely to feel the pressure of globalization, more so than the older generations do¹⁵. Designating Japan a conformist society, Toivonen argues how through the seniority-based structure and demographic aging conformist pressure stays strong¹⁶. In a society that was built on post-war values, where life-employment was the social security and promotion with age was a given, the rigid system that was created in Japan to ship young people through school and in and through work-life many decades ago may have worked outstandingly. However, with the economy globalizing and life-time employment among others becoming a matter of the past, these remaining values are putting extreme pressure on young adults even though the benefits of social security with perseverance will no longer be delivered. It is Japan's senior government and business elites that refuse to adapt to modern global society and keep clinging on to old values; something possible because of the seniority-based value system in Japan. By doing so, however, they 'block much of the potential that the youth have to offer to innovate ideas and strategies that can contribute to increased competitiveness in the global market,' Toivonen argues¹⁷.

¹³ Cole 2013, p. 60

¹⁴ Zielenziger 2006, p.17

¹⁵ Toivonen et al. 2011, p. 1

¹⁶ Toivonen et al. 2011, p. 2

¹⁷ Toivonen et al. 2011, p.3

Sadly, there are hardly any alternatives for these young people other than following the clear and rigid path put in place for them. Employment, other than that with a big company on a permanent contract, does not provide the same social benefits like insurances and retirement money. And the only way to be accepted in such a company is by following the track from primary school to college or university, and going straight into work-life, becoming a *shakaijin* or society person. According to Toivonen, those who fail to enter straight after university are generally considered inferior in terms of status¹⁸. Young adults who choose to work part-time instead (or are forced to do so because of various situations) are degeneratively called *freeters*¹⁹ and severely looked down upon, having nigh to no chance to succeed in society afterwards. Those people for who this pressure becomes too much, become ‘retreatists’ or *hikikomori*. They have become disillusioned with both dominant goals and legitimate means to attain them²⁰. While an alternative could have been to rebel against such a system, the Japanese, as part of their sense of shame and group culture, much rather retreat in a form of silent protest, choosing ‘asocial’ over ‘anti-social’ behaviour, Toivonen explains. As Zielenziger puts it, “once you drop out, you can’t drop back in²¹.”

Sustaining the problem

The reason the *hikikomori*-phenomenon has become such a big problem to Japanese society is not only because of the various causes listed above. Another important factor in this is the fact that Japanese society is hardly doing anything to resolve the situation. This, for starters, can be attributed to the lack of alternatives to the educational elevator, but also to the lack of acknowledgement, the phenomenon of *amae* and plainly the refusal of Japanese people to see a psychiatrist.

As is also stated as possible causes, there are hardly -if at all- any alternatives to the rigid path from elementary school student to *shakaijin*. And even worse, as Zielenziger points

¹⁸ Toivonen et al. 2011, p.3

¹⁹ A word comprised of the English *free* and the German *arbeiter* (worker)

²⁰ Toivonen et al. 2011, p.5

²¹ Zielenziger 2006, p.32

out, once you fall off, it is very hard to come back on. For starters, the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, while having been around for well over two decades²², took several years, even after becoming publicly known, before it was formally acknowledged by the Japanese Ministry of Health. Only as early as 2003, under pressure from concerned parents, did the Ministry release an official report acknowledging its prevalence and outlining features that characterize *hikikomori*²³. Indeed, Zielenziger points out in his case studies that those who did seek medical attention to their social withdrawal problem, were not taken very serious and sent home by their doctors with some pills for the symptoms, instead of properly being heard on the underlying problems. “They didn’t have any skills to help,” a patient claims²⁴.

Treatment, when available, was mainly focused on ‘how to reintegrate these isolated individuals into mainstream social participation’. It was perhaps Saitō Tamaki himself who was one of the first to properly acknowledge the underlying problems as connected to family situations in middle- to upper middle-class families²⁵. Saitō also explains that most people that did come to him with social withdrawal problems (patients themselves or their parents) were already in an advanced state, usually going on for several years. This may be attributed to the fact that Japanese people tend to not seek psychiatric help until absolutely necessary. According to Borovoy, ‘Japan stands in contrast to the United States and European Union nations for its relatively low incidence of self-reported mental illness and its low incidence of seeking help of psychiatrists or other mental-health professionals’²⁶. Mental health in Japan is seen as a ‘matter of attitude’ and therefore it is believed it can only be influenced by one’s own mind. Any form of mental degeneration, even suicide, Borovoy argues, may be considered voluntary in Japan. In order to cope with mental problems, personal adjustment in the form of the development of qualities of perseverance and resignation are essential in Japanese society²⁷.

²² Saitō 1998

²³ Hattori 2006, p. 183; Cole 2013, p. 31

²⁴ Zielenziger 2006, pp. 33-34

²⁵ Borovoy 2008, p. 555

²⁶ Borovoy 2008, p. 556

²⁷ Borovoy 2008, pp. 556-557

Also, in cases of primary and secondary school students, the topic of family matters is generally avoided by teachers, and even considered a taboo. According to Kawanishi, quoted in Borovoy, patterns of school refusal (*futōkō*) are rarely attributed to the possibility of a psychiatric problem²⁸. Even worse, in such case that a counsellor or teacher suggests that it be wise for a child to see a doctor or psychiatrist or seek special education, it is severely frowned upon and may result in the parents thinking that their child is labelled as a “problem child”, which may severely affect their further career in school. Furthermore, as Japan places a lot of emphasis on educating children equally, assuming it will allow them to ‘mould to social expectations’, special needs are more often than not ignored by schools and parents alike²⁹.

Lastly there is the phenomenon of *amae*. *Amae* is a word that does not have an equivalent in most Western languages, including English, according to Doi, who was one of the first to write on *Amae* as a social phenomenon in 1986. It is commonly translated with ‘depending on others’ and is such a common and accepted thing in families in Japan, that it has its own word in Japanese vocabulary. Wanting to depend on others, as well as the feeling of a lack thereof, is more easily expressed in Japanese³⁰.

While in the West it is quite common that young adults leave the house when turning 18 or entering college or university, in Japan children live with their parents until they are married and/or have a stable job. Especially in the case of a child turning towards *hikikomori*, it is usually the mother who takes pity on them, allowing them to retreat in the ‘safety’ of home, and the child becoming all the more dependent on his or her parents³¹. *Hikikomori*-patients consider the home and their room a safe place, and will feed off their parents as long as they can, often in order to keep away and recover from the pressure of society. It may very well be this protective lifestyle that has allowed young people to stay in this withdrawn state for so long.

²⁸ Borovoy 2008, p. 560

²⁹ Borovoy 2008, pp. 561-562

³⁰ Doi 1986

³¹ Cole 2013, p.38

Also, similar to how Japanese rarely seek psychiatric help, families will very much always (initially) take care of the problem of a *hikikomori* child themselves³². This is further influenced by the sense of shame in Japan, where both the parents as well as relatives feel ashamed of the condition their child is in³³. Having a *hikikomori* child is not something to boast about, and especially in Japan, it is much rather kept quiet than properly addressed and discussed. It is often seen as having failed in properly raising the child. In case of the *hikikomori* child becoming violent, the police are often not called, as neighbours will blame them for ‘causing a disturbance in the neighbourhood’³⁴.

A negative image

As I have touched upon previously, *hikikomori* has had a negative social image since the concept was first introduced. According to Heinze and Thomas, especially between 2000 and 2004, when the term had only just entered society in Japan thanks to Saitō’s book, the media image of *hikikomori* was as deviant and selfish youngsters, even calling them parasites³⁵. Also, as some very severe cases of *hikikomori* have been linked to murders that made the news in Japan in the late nineties, the initial image was a profoundly negative one. And while slowly the acknowledgement of *hikikomori* as a social problem may be growing among people directly involved, the general public at this very moment still sees them as lazy problem children that are unable or unwilling to adapt to society, and often blame their parents for doing a bad job in raising them³⁶. Kajiwara Kimiko describes how, prior to her involvement in the support of *hikikomori*, she thought them to be “simply lazy people, people without willingness to do anything or dropouts.”³⁷ It is, however, only a superficial impression, claims Saitō, as *hikikomori*-patients are far from lazy or bored, and often caught in deep conflicts inside their

³² Borovoy 2008, p. 567

³³ Zielenziger 2006, p. 40

³⁴ Borovoy 2008, p. 569

³⁵ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p. 158

³⁶ Borovoy 2008, p. 562; Zielenziger 2006

³⁷ Kajiwara 2009, p. 80

mind, ‘not giving them the psychological room to feel bored’³⁸. Moreover, as Kajiware argues, *hikikomori*-patients often have a very negative view of themselves too. In one example, Kajiware describes how a patient in the NPO she works for explains how he thinks “it was a mistake that he was born as a human” and that he much rather “had been born as a cockroach.”³⁹ While this is perhaps an extreme example, it shows that the negative image of the *hikikomori* is not only from the outside, but often from the inside as well.

Development of social attention

Interestingly enough there is little written on success cases concerning ‘return to society by *hikikomori*’. As we can see from examples given by both Saitō and Zielenziger, cases of successful escape from withdrawal are not non-existent. However, they are rare, and still require a lot of effort by both the patient and their immediate family, as can see from both Sonoko Yokoyu’s case study of a now rehabilitated *hikikomori* patient, as well as from the story of a former *hikikomori*’s mother I met in Japan. Even if one is able to escape the state of withdrawal, and reintegrate with society, it will still take quite some time before one is completely self-confident⁴⁰. The use of a “rental sister or brother,” which supports the *hikikomori*-patient in returning to society, has recently become a more common form of treatment, especially when the parents are unable to be the support themselves⁴¹. On the other hand, while success cases are, at least in literature, still rare, and the problem is still a long way off from being solved, we can see progress concerning both the treatment of *hikikomori* as well as their image in society.

It is necessary to put important events concerning *hikikomori* in Japan and worldwide in a timeline perspective. According to Horiguchi, the problem of social withdrawal has been around in Japan for quite some time, several decades even, even before the term was first

³⁸ Saitō 2013, p. 23; also Ishikawa, (Ishikawa, Ryōko 石川, 良子, “Hikikomori no ‘gōru’: ‘shūrō’ demo naku, ‘taijin kankei’ demo naku” ひきこもりの〈ゴール〉: 「就労」でもなく「対人関係」でもなく, Seikyūsha, Tokyo, 2007.) quoted in Heinze & Thomas 2014, p. 159

³⁹ Kajiware 2009, pp. 90-91

⁴⁰ Yokoyu 2006, pp. 169-176

⁴¹ Kajiware 2009, pp. 82-83

coined⁴². Following the social lethargy and apathy in the 1980s, the late eighties saw several cases of the so called “School Withdrawal Syndrome” or *futōkō*, as they were later called, and these cases seem to share common features with *hikikomori*⁴³. The term *hikikomori* first started to appear in the newspapers in the mid-1980s, with four reported cases of *hikikomori* in the main newspapers in 1985⁴⁴. The first governmental actions started as early as 1991, where the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched the ‘MHW *hikikomori/futōkō* child welfare project’⁴⁵. It needs to be noted that this project was meant primarily for children less than eighteen years of age, so it was probably mainly a reaction to the emergence of the *futōkō* in the mid-eighties.

In 1995 a rapid increase in the number of school refusals, which would eventually lead to an increase in *hikikomori*, was observed, noted by Ishikawa⁴⁶. Having witnessed this concerning increase in social withdrawal amongst youngsters, Saitō Tamaki consequently wrote his book defining *hikikomori*, released in 1998, starting country-wide recognition of the problem, and making the term part of colloquial Japanese⁴⁷. It is around the same time that early support groups for *hikikomori* get created⁴⁸, and a start at tackling the problem was made.

Not long after the word *hikikomori* became widespread in Japan, the term received a very negative image in society; several criminal cases were connected to *hikikomori*, as the suspects were supposedly ‘socially reclusive young men’. Three cases are mentioned by Horiguchi; in 1999 a young man walked onto a playground and killed a random young boy; in 2000 a thirty-seven-year old unemployed man was found having a nineteen-year old girl hidden in his room, who had been there for around nine years; and, also in 2000, a seventeen-year old boy hijacked a bus and stabbed a passenger to death⁴⁹. Because of the media attention, *hikikomori* were soon seen as potentially dangerous young men. While many scholars, psychiatrists and officials quickly started writing their opinions about *hikikomori* from 2000

⁴² Horiguchi 2012, p.123

⁴³ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p.158; Cole 2013, p.30

⁴⁴ Furlong 2008, p. 313

⁴⁵ Horiguchi 2012, p.125

⁴⁶ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p.158

⁴⁷ Horiguchi 2012, p.134; Heinze & Thomas 2014, p.158

⁴⁸ Cole 2013, p 40-41; Zielenziger 2006; Horiguchi 2012, p. 125

⁴⁹ Horiguchi 2012. p.127

onwards, one group was not heard and became, as Horiguchi calls it, a ‘muted group’⁵⁰. Various types of support facilities subsequently started working on rehabilitating *hikikomori*. Their methods, however, vary; with on the one hand the kind and accommodating approach like Tomiya Fujita and his *Friend Space*, while on the other hand the rigid, disciplinary and employment-orientated approach by people like Osada Yuriko with her *Osada-Juku*. The latter has been in the media often, being seen yelling “Don’t depend [on your parents]!” at *hikikomori* and even pouring buckets of cold water over them, forcing them to ‘wake up’ and readjust to society⁵¹.

Through pressure of concerned parents, the Ministry of Health and Welfare released an official report “acknowledging its prevalence and outlining features that characterize *hikikomori*” in 2003⁵². As explained before, the definition of *hikikomori* used by the government is largely based on Saitō’s definition. As a possible result, the number of mentions of *hikikomori* in the major newspapers of Japan increased in the years after, reaching 794 in the year 2005, a 200-fold increase over the same statistics twenty years before⁵³.

According to Horiguchi, *Hikikomori* gradually became more of a common-used term, and more often than not it got used for people who did not fit the profile of a *hikikomori*. It is then, in 2005, that a new term, the N.E.E.T., appeared in Japan, defined as “one who is neither a *furitā* or a temp or unemployed, and who is often criticised as a parasite and feels the moral pressure to re-join the workforce”⁵⁴. The term N.E.E.T. seemed to take over part of what was before called *hikikomori*, as the N.E.E.T. are similar to *hikikomori* in the sense that they do not work or receive education, but are not socially reclusive. As a new social problem, it also received a lot of attention, taking it away from *hikikomori*. Coinciding with the emergence of the N.E.E.T., *Hikikomori* started to be seen in a new light. In social discussions the Western-oriented thought of *hikikomori* as ‘social exclusion’ received popularity, where *hikikomori* are

⁵⁰ Horiguchi 2012. p.128

⁵¹ Horiguchi 2012, pp. 130-131

⁵² Hattori 2006, p. 183; Cole 2013, p.31

⁵³ Furlong 2008, p. 313

⁵⁴ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p.158

“a socially disadvantaged group that requires economic as well as social, cultural and political support.” Alternatively, psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as lay supporters, tended to see *hikikomori* as a “developmental disability that needs treatment”⁵⁵.

In 2006 Micheal Zielenziger released the first book on *hikikomori* written in English, making the topic widely available to a global audience, and while the focus in Japan seemed to have toned down a bit, the word *hikikomori* starts to appear in more Western literature, eventually leading to Saitō’s 1998 book being translated to English in 2013. However, in 2010, the Japanese government showed it had not forgotten the problem of *hikikomori* and, as Horiguchi calls it, it becomes an important year for governmental involvement in the *hikikomori* problem; the new law for the Promotion of Support Towards the Development of Children and Youth (2010) promised further state support for *hikikomori* measures, new guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and the Cabinet Office reported on a nationwide survey on *hikikomori*⁵⁶. Perhaps the negative image *hikikomori* received in the early 2000’s has finally started to disappear, as Heinze and Thomas argue in their 2014 article that “as *hikikomori* are becoming more sociable, their image is gradually improving”⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ Horiguchi 2012, pp.133-134

⁵⁶ Horiguchi 2012. pp. 134

⁵⁷ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p. 160

Chapter 2 - Hikikomori in Popular Culture

In the previous chapter I discussed how the current problem of *hikikomori* is in Japan, and how current scholarly literature thinks about it. In this chapter I will take a look at the *hikikomori*-problem from a different angle: through Japanese popular culture, specifically, through anime. The anime industry is one of Japan's biggest collective industries -working together with manga, games, music, toy-makers and light novels to create a big interacting industry for popular culture- and has gained much popularity abroad as well.

Hikikomori as side characters

As a now well-known social problem, *hikikomori* too has been used in novels, manga and animation alike. In the 2007 anime *Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei* (tl. Goodbye, Mr. Despair), the negative minded teacher Itoshiki Nozomu is tasked with the retrieval of a *hikikomori* student who has severely refused to go to school, screaming and throwing stuff at her father whenever tried to take her out of the room. A gag ensues, with an accompanying student of Nozomu, one who can only think positive, refuses to believe in a *hikikomori* close to her “as they only appear in TV and newspaper” and calls the *hikikomori* a protective spirit (*zashiki warashi*) instead. They decide to instead lock her up in the room to make her unable to escape; frightening the *hikikomori* girl to the extent she instead wants to leave the room (even begging to be let out). When Nozomu (accidentally) says some sweet things to the girl, she gets infatuated with him, and decides to go back to school, albeit that she still retreats herself there, and the problem remains unsolved since.

In the 2011 anime *Denpa Onna to Seishun Otoko* (tl. Radio wave girl and youthful boy), the cousin of the main character is somewhat of recluse, as after disappearing for several weeks, supposedly being kidnapped by aliens, and losing her memory of the events, and consequently breaking her leg, she becomes unsociable, refuses to go to school and wraps herself in a futon like a sushi. Through contact with the main character, which comes to care for her, she eventually opens up and returns to school.

In the 2012-13 college dormitory drama *Sakurasō no Petto na Kanojo*, (e. The Pet Girl of Sakurasou,) one of the fellow dorm-dwellers is a *hikikomori* computer-genius, who prefers not to speak to people at all, and converse through e-mail and text-messages. Also having gynophobia (fear of women) further amplifies his condition. Having been too smart for his friends in middle and high school and eventually shut out, he is reluctant to make new friends in college, but he eventually warms up to the people in the dorm, becoming friends with them.

A most recent example of *hikikomori* as side-character or side-plot is in the 2015 series *Denpa Kyōshi* (tl. Radio-wave teacher), where, similar to *Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei*, the protagonist is a teacher, Kagami Jun'ichirō, and two of his students are truants. One of the students, Sachiko Tanaka, is in secret a beginning mangaka, and she sees school as useless to her path of becoming one. The other truant is Akari Kōtarō, a boy who prefers crossdressing as a girl. After being found out and consequently bullied to the point of injury, Kōtarō has become a recluse hiding himself in a game. Kōtarō is afraid of returning to school, out of fear his new class will again reject him, but through the help of Jun' Ichirō the class accepts Kōtarō and he is able to re-join school.

An interesting event concerning *hikikomori*/reclusive N.E.E.T. appears in the 2009 anime *Higashi no Eden* (Eden of the East). The series protagonist, Takizawa Akira, along with eleven others, has been given ten billion yen each to save Japan with. However, as his memory has been wiped, he remembers nothing of it. At the series start an occurrence is introduced that is explained bit by bit as the series progresses; 20.000 reclusive N.E.E.T.s had mysteriously disappeared around the same time twenty missiles had fallen on Tokyo, and event later called 'Careless Monday'. The strange thing about the event was that not a single person had died during the event. It is revealed in the end, that Takizawa had used part of his money to move the 20.000 N.E.E.T. out of their houses and had made them evacuate the district of Tokyo where the missiles would later fall. In order to keep the N.E.E.T. away from media attention he then had them shipped to Dubai for several months to lay low. While all the N.E.E.T. were very angry with Takizawa for doing so, one of them noted that the experience had helped him reintegrate

into society. When, in the last episode, they are threatened by another missile attack, Takizawa uses the combined intelligence of all the N.E.E.T. to find the best way to avoid a catastrophe, and then uses the found method.

Hikikomori as main characters

The 2004 series *Rozen Maiden* is one of the early series featuring a protagonist as a *hikikomori*; Sakurada Jun is a middle school student, who, after being bullied and ostracized for wanting to become a dress-designer, refuses to go to school or even leave the house. Having developed an interest in supernatural objects, he buys them online and ships them back within the cool-down period. His parents are overseas and his sister, who is in high school, takes care of him. One day a box arrives, within it a *Rozen Maiden*, a sentient doll, to whom he becomes a servant. Through his interactions with the world of the *Rozen Maiden*, he acquires the courage to eventually return to society.

In a similar fashion, the main character of the 2014 series *Mekakucity Actors*, Kisaragi Shintarō, is introduced as a *hikiNEET* (an amalgam of *hikikomori* and N.E.E.T.) with an IQ of 168, who has not been outside his room for two years since the death of his classmate and love interest and has been addicted to the internet since. When he accidentally spills his drink over his keyboard during the O-bon holiday, he is forced to go out to buy a new keyboard, as home delivery will take three days during O-bon, evidently too long for him to go without internet. At the electronics-store, he gets caught up in a terrorist attack, and is saved by a mysterious group called the *mekakushi-dan* (group of blindfolded) who have special powers related to their eyes. In the series, not much more than the reason of his withdrawal is explored, focusing the story elsewhere.

As we can see from these examples, there have been quite some series in which *hikikomori*, often in combination with *futōkō* and N.E.E.T. concepts, have been adapted over the past one to two decades. The most common one is perhaps in settings where the protagonist is a teacher. In most cases, even when put in the role of the protagonist, the element of the

hikikomori is not so vastly explored. However, there are two series, both released in the past decade, that take the role of the protagonist as *hikikomori* very seriously, and use it as a base setting for the series. In this chapter I will take a closer look these two anime series; *Welcome to the N.H.K!* released in 2006, and *No Game No Life* released in 2014. How do these series portray their *hikikomori*? What causes them to be in their reclusive state, what troubles do they encounter throughout the story, and how, perhaps, can they break free from being *hikikomori*?

Portrayal of Hikikomori in *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life*

Looking at these two series, how can we see *hikikomori* are portrayed through anime? I will try to offer a similar interpretation as I have used in chapter one, while using the works of Hairston as well as Heinze and Thomas on *Welcome to the N.H.K.* to analyse the “hikikomori” in these series. For the sake of understanding the plot of the series, I have added summaries to both series in the appendix.

Causes

When looking at both *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life*, what causes for turning to a *hikikomori*-state are provided in these series? Social pressure and bullying are some of the first to come to light in the case of Shiro. Shiro, being a smart kid with a very high IQ, is bullied for being too smart and ‘winning too much’. Being one of her kind, there seems to be no place for her in society. Similarly, the idea of everyone around him laughing at and ridiculing him triggered Satō to escape college and retreat in his room. Technically, it was the anxiety attack Satō suffered that caused him to turn into a *hikikomori*. Satō seems to have become the victim of social pressure, at least as he perceives it, and/or fear of society. He is afraid of what people around him think. This is then further amplified by feeling ashamed about his condition. Even in high school Satō has never been very sociable, to what Hairston calls a ‘quiet loser’⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ Hairston 2010, p.313

In the case of *No Game No Life* shame plays a much lesser role, but resignation with society is a much bigger issue. Sora blames society for being too unreasonable, and giving him and his sister little other options than retreating into their rooms and playing games. Gaming, in this case, is more of a platform where they can exercise their skills that they cannot exercise in society, than just a plain hobby. Shiro, through being bullied and ostracized because of her IQ, came to refuse going to school, becoming a *futōkō* or truant, and eventually ends up turning *hikikomori* together with her brother. Sora, on the other hand, has succumbed to social pressure, being shunned for ‘losing too much’ and talking his way through life. Also, as he is able to read people’s true intentions through ‘cold reading’ or reading one’s facial expressions, he has become resigned with the people around him apart from Shiro. They feel little shame from their situation; rather, they loathe society for being the way it is.

Continuing the *hikikomori* lifestyle

Interestingly enough, Satō lives by himself, which poses the question as to why he is able to sustain this lifestyle; he does, after all, not have any income from work. It is revealed that his parents keep sending him enough money to live and pay his rent. His parents are oblivious to the fact that he does not attend university anymore, as he has little contact with them. However, when Satō’s mother visits Tokyo and pays him a visit, she does get suspicious, and sees right through his fake job and girlfriend. Even so, she does not blame him, as she sees her son as an honest and good boy, and trusts him to do what is best. We can see here what Doi explains as *amae* in Japanese culture, where Satō remains dependent on his parents and his mother allowing him to. Even when later in the series his allowance is cut in half, because of the financial difficulties of his parents, it is revealed that his mother tried to not have to do so as long as possible. When it happens, though, it devastates Satō, as his lifestyle is being threatened. Only through new dependence on Misaki and Yamazaki is he able to continue living as a *hikikomori*.

It is also the relationship with Misaki that Heinze and Thomas argue as an example of *amae*, where they compare the relationship between Misaki and Satō as one between mother and son⁵⁹.

In *No Game No Life* Sora and Shiro also make sure to maintain their lifestyle as much as possible. As they have no interest to return to the unreasonable society they loathe and that forced them to be this way, they have found a form of solace in simply playing games in their room all day. One could wonder who pays for all their expenses, and nothing is mentioned of the sort in the anime. In the original light novels Sora mentions that their parents have abandoned them, though in what way is unclear. I think it is not unimaginable, however, that with their intelligence and wit it might be possible to make enough money over the internet, but that still remains a mystery. Sora does make the remark that white bread is the most cost-efficient way of eating, after being offered an (expensive) calorie bar by Shiro, indicating that he does care for expenses, but the games and consoles must still cost quite some money.

Manifestation

In what form does the *hikikomori* state manifest with the characters in these two series? To start off with *Welcome to the N.H.K!*, at the start of the series Satō has no contact with the outside world, save perhaps a phone call from his mother. He does go out once in a while, but this is limited to visiting the convenience store to do the necessary groceries like food, cigarettes and beer, and to visit the park once or twice a week to smoke, but all this happens at night as to not encounter other people as much as possible. As he does go outside occasionally at night, it seems he is not so much afraid of the outside, but mainly of being surrounded or having to confront people. He is not even able to go outside of his door to complain to his neighbour about the loud music. While Satō is not completely socially incapable, he is seen having trouble holding a proper conversation with people he meets for the first time, as when Misaki's aunt appears at his door, when he tries to talk to Misaki at the manga café to apply for a job, and

⁵⁹ Heinze and Thomas 2014, p. 161

when he visits Yamazaki's college and is cornered by a teacher. People he has known for a while, like Yamazaki, Hitomi and later also Misaki he has more ease conversing with.

The situation with Sora and Shiro is a bit more challenging than it initially seems. When arriving in the other world, Disboard, they seem to manage fairly well interacting with all the people in town and on the road. While that may initially seem true, it is later revealed, when the two become separated, they are only able to keep their act together while being with another. As soon as Sora and Shiro become separated, they revert to anthropophobic teens with no self-esteem. Sora is seen repeatedly apologizing, covering himself with his arms while pulling his knees to his body as to protect himself. Shiro, at the same time, suffers a severe anxiety attack, constantly asking for her brother. While together they may simply seem as a strange pair of siblings, apart they are completely socially incapable. Even worse, even if not surrounded by other people, they cannot be separate from one another. Their whole mental survival is based on complete trust and dependence on each other.

Escaping from *hikikomori*

While Satō is occasionally found saying that he prefers to stay a *hikikomori* as it is easier, and is devastated when this is not possible when his allowance is cut, it seems to be more his actual fear of interacting with people than unwillingness to actually do something about his situation. This can be seen as early as episode one, as the confrontation with Misaki's aunt talking about N.E.E.T. and *hikikomori* triggers him to find a part-time job. It is perhaps his failing in finding a job or an otherwise way out, as well as resignation to the difficulty of it, that keeps him in the *hikikomori*-state. When at the end of the story his parents cut his allowance completely, he is quickly seen finding a job. Of course, he had been confronted with society throughout the series, but it still shows that, when necessary, he is able to fend for himself. Similarly, Megumi's *hikikomori* brother is able to start a job after his sister leaves him to fend for himself for several days. While initially just being starved and looking for food, he takes the opportunity given to him to start working properly in the restaurant that fed him. He is even seen whistling while

making deliveries, indicating he prefers this lifestyle over that of a *hikikomori*. Hairston argues that this event may imply “that at least some *hikikomori* can be cured with tough love and being kicked out of their nest”⁶⁰.

This also brings us to the way Satō is able to escape from being a *hikikomori*. While unable to escape his situation by himself, as seen with his attempt at a job in the first episode, through the help of others, mainly Misaki and Yamazaki, he is able to adjust to society step by step, with plenty of ups and downs. As Hairston argues, “It is Misaki who is at Satō’s side throughout the series, following him through all his trials and failed schemes. It is her counselling that initially forces him out of his apartment and gradually enables him to function outside during daytime.”⁶¹ While not fully cured of his social fear at the end of the series, Satō is at least able to fend for himself now. It is, however, suggested that it takes a considerable amount of time, and in the end he is more or less forced to start at least a part-time job because of his cut allowance. Even so, it is likely the support by Misaki and Yamazaki that gave him the strength to escape eventually, indicating that personal help by, for example, friends, is most effective.

In *No Game No Life* one of the biggest triggers that allows the siblings to escape is the change of scenery; being placed in a different society that is more in line with their way of life. Secondly the meeting of new friends that do not shun them for who they are allows new trust in others to grow. When separated from Sora later in the story, Shiro is seen having an anxiety attack, but the voice of their newfound friend Jibril allows her to recover.

In my opinion is the most interesting part about this series is the fact that the *hikikomori* protagonists are transferred to a completely different society, one that fits their needs and interests. The new society, where their skills as game-lovers are of considerable use, they quickly find pleasure in interacting with society, and do not limit themselves to returning to a reclusive lifestyle. This in itself opens the discussion that a different society might be a solution

⁶⁰ Hairston 2010, p. 319

⁶¹ Hairston 2010, p. 320

to the problem of *hikikomori*, as society itself is the problem causing the *hikikomori*, especially, as it seems to me, amongst gifted youngsters. In a broader sense, if given the right opportunities and choices in life, it might allow some *hikikomori*-patients to break free of their reclusive lifestyle.

Image

In the case of Satō as well as Sora and Shiro, they initially do not seem to have any intention of leaving their ‘comfortable’ *hikikomori* lifestyle shell; Satō having been a *hikikomori* for nearly four years and Sora and Shiro outright proclaiming to prefer reclusive living. However, Satō tries multiple times to get out of his situation, but simply fails miserably most of the time. He even goes as far as having his friend Yamazaki make a picture of him, while he photographs young girls, in order to see his own wrongdoings, when he is busted by Misaki. Heinze and Thomas remark that this episode implies “that *hikikomori* are not necessarily selfish and lacking in ambition, and Satō, with his self-awareness and ambition to help others, is not depicted as a bad person”⁶². It is what Hairston describes as *Welcome to the N.H.K!* being a ‘dark satire’ where Satō is bound to fail every time⁶³. Heinze and Thomas argue that by using humour and empathy this way, Satō’s *hikikomori* life is turned into “an adventurous, almost positive experience, inviting the reader to sympathize”, turning him into an anti-hero who never gives up⁶⁴.

Sora and Shiro similarly seem not to care much about the outside world other than online games, but after being teleported to a new and more comfortable world, and befriending Stephanie, they start to care more about helping other people. Even though Sora claims it is mainly out of interest in the challenging games they can play this way, he is seen comforting Stephanie and thinking about the good of the country.

⁶² Heinze & Thomas 2014, p. 162

⁶³ Hairston 2010, p. 313, 321

⁶⁴ Heinze & Thomas 2014, p. 162

Criticism on Society

No Game No Life does something that is perhaps new and almost unique to the image on *hikikomori*; it lays the problem of *hikikomori* not with the patients, but with society, specifically Japanese society as a whole. From the start we can hear Sora lamenting about how unreasonable society is, calling it nothing more than a ‘shitty game’. But the series does not just leave it at that, it also takes the *hikikomori* protagonists to a different world with a different, ‘better suited’ world with clear rules, as to criticize Japanese, or even this world’s society even more, as the *hikikomori* siblings are able to be successful in that (particular) world.

Even in *Welcome to the N.H.K!* we can already see a similar kind of criticism take place. While supposedly brought forward by hallucinations, one of the key story-elements that returns throughout the series, even being part of the title, is N.H.K!. In the series it receives mainly the abbreviation *Nihon Hikikomori Kyōkai*, or Japanese Association for *Hikikomori*. However, as it purposely shares these initials with the Japanese Broadcasting Association, *Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai*, a line to Japanese society can be drawn. The N.H.K! in *Welcome to the N.H.K!* purposely tries to make all youth into *hikikomori*, and Satō calls this a conspiracy. This may therefore be an indirect manner of blaming Japanese society or the government for creating the *hikikomori*. I would like to add, however, that as these theories are also written within Satō’s hallucinations, another interpretation may be that it is the opposite; a ridiculization of concepts where society is at fault, though looking at *No Game No Life* I dare to doubt that last theory. Still, Hairston describes it as a way for Satō to “blame his problems on outside forces”⁶⁵.

Summary

The key concepts for turning into a *hikikomori* in these series seem to be bullying, fear of society, school refusal and resignation with society. Having high intelligence or being different from society seems to accelerate this process. This is then further amplified by shame and the fact that there is little other options available to them. *Amae* and unwillingness to return to an

⁶⁵ Hairston 2010, p.315

unreasonable society seems to keep *hikikomori* in their reclusive state, although new friendships and forceful re-entering of society are both offered as possible ways of rehabilitation.

Opportunity, necessity and curiosity seem to be the keys offered by *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, while *No Game No Life* focusses on a change of scenery or even a totally different society.

In the next chapter I will compare the image of *hikikomori* we have seen here, as portrayed in these *anime*, to the actual image provided by scholarly works. Also I will argue the importance of these portrayed images in popular culture, as I argue they are tightly connected to the thoughts of society.

Chapter 3 - The Relationship of Popular Culture and Society

We can see from examples used in the previous chapter that in recent years *hikikomori* have become a more and more present element in anime and other popular culture -most of said anime have been based off of manga or light novels-, even becoming the protagonists of their stories in which them being *hikikomori* is an important part of the storyline. However, even before Saitō Tamaki wrote his book on the topic, the idea of *hikikomori* has perhaps already been part of storytelling in anime. In her thesis on issues in contemporary Japan as seen through anime, Sara Kate Ellis argues that the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki Evangelion*, 2005) uses many elements of the troubles *hikikomori* encounter in life, from pressure of parents and society, to the wish to run away and hide from harsh reality. As Ellis argues, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was released around roughly the same time the problem of *hikikomori* started to widely appear in society⁶⁶.

To Ellis, the protagonist, Shinji Ikari, is “the perfect icon of despondency for a decade that saw prolonged recession, a devastating earthquake and horrific acts of terrorism committed by its own citizens”⁶⁷. Shinji has a lot in common with the *hikikomori*, Ellis argues; “pressure from the older generation, a sense of abandonment and betrayal, a reliance on the virtual, and a mystique that has surrounded the recluse since Kobo Daishi went into religious seclusion in 792.”⁶⁸ Going deeper into the story, Ellis, for example, compares the inside, the ‘womb’, of the EVA-robot with the motherly protection many *hikikomori* receive. In this sense *Neo Genesis Evangelion* becomes a metaphor for the hardships and life of the *hikikomori*⁶⁹. I think that Ellis’ comparison is an early example of the influence the social problem of *hikikomori* in Japan has exerted on popular culture in Japan.

In this chapter I wish to depict both the resonance between anime and reality, as well as giving an understanding of the importance of the production side of popular culture in

⁶⁶ Ellis 2005, p. 24

⁶⁷ Ellis 2005, p. 25

⁶⁸ Ellis 2005, p. 26

⁶⁹ Ellis 2005, p. 24

relationship to *hikikomori*. First, I will compare what we have found concerning *hikikomori* in both scholarly literature, as well as the view we get of *hikikomori* through anime, and see how the two are similar and also differ from another. Second, I will argue how anime and other popular culture are strongly connected to Japanese society, influencing one another back and forth.

While using the works of established authors like Sharon Kinsella and Susan Napier, I would also like to introduce the very recent media theory of Ian Condry, who in his book argues how anime is not simply an independent artistic media whose success is based on its creators. Under the title of ‘collaborative creativity’, he introduces anime as part of an intricate web of different media, spanning from creator to fans and from animation to toys, all connected and influencing one another. Condry’s theory is a new development in the area of anime studies, and allows for a far broader, more comprehensive understanding of the production process that comes with anime. In a similar fashion, I argue that social problems, as well as the public interest in them, influences what stories are deemed interesting enough to be made into an anime, a practice explained by Condry to be a lengthy and effort-requiring process⁷⁰.

Resonance of reality in anime

Let us put the anime and the real world together. To what point are they similar and perhaps more importantly, what notable differences can we see? The first notable thing I would like to point out, is actually the matter of defining what a *hikikomori* is. In the series of *Welcome to the N.H.K!*, Misaki’s aunt refers to N.E.E.T.s as being reclusive, and Satō immediately recognizes it as implying himself, a *hikikomori*. It is interesting because in the ten years since, *hikikomori* and N.E.E.T. are often mixed up and used together in both anime and scholarly literature, even to the point of the words being fused to ‘hiki-N.E.E.T.’ in the series *Mekakucity Actors*⁷¹. This might indicate that, even before the discussion reached academic writing, the public had already connected these two phenomena, and while initially mixed up at times, they are now considered

⁷⁰ Condry 2013, chapter 1

⁷¹ *Mekakucity Actors* 2014, Episode 1, 11:25

separate, though often connected. Interestingly enough, as I briefly mentioned in chapter two, sometimes people who are socially shut off from society may still be depicted as productive, as we can see in both *Sakurasō no Petto na Kanojo*⁷² and *Denpa Kyōshi*'s⁷³ case.

When looking at what causes withdrawal in both academic work and anime, we find many similarities; bullying is perhaps the biggest one, which is often followed by a fear towards society, and truancy (*futōkō*) is a common consequence. The causes of bullying vary in the anime, though high IQ and unique interests are common factors. As with the situation in the real world as argued by Cole, Borovoy, Zielenziger and Saitō, the anime shows a similar situation where bullying is often a causal factor, and truancy precedes becoming a *hikikomori*, as we can see in *No Game No Life* with Shiro as well as in the cases of *Rozen Maiden* (Jun) and *Denpa Kyōshi* (Kōtarō). Interestingly, while intended or not, in all the cases of bullying in these anime, interference by other people to stop the bullying is not mentioned or does not happen, much as Zielenziger argues⁷⁴.

That bullying as a cause does not necessarily have to be the case is seen in most other examples, primarily *Welcome To the N.H.K!*, where shame is perhaps the greater factor. Satō's situation can, I think, be best compared to what Saitō calls "being afraid of the looks of neighbours"⁷⁵ and Cole defines as 'the fear of being evaluated and misunderstood in society'⁷⁶. *Welcome to the N.H.K!* indeed shows us how *hikikomori* are not necessarily unwilling to get out of their situation, but it is the fear of having to interact with others, to which they are not used, and the anxiety of being negatively evaluated that causes them to choose the easier path of staying inside. It is perhaps the *hikikomori* all the more that wishes to be thought of as a normal human being. That, however, is one of the things not granted to young people, as, especially in Japan, anything that is out of the ordinary and off the regular path is not accepted. As I explained in chapter one based on the research of Borovoy, children are preferred by their

⁷² Sakurasō 2012, episodes 5,9

⁷³ Denpa Kyōshi 2015, episode 8

⁷⁴ Zielenziger 2006, pp. 51-52

⁷⁵ Saitō 2013, pp. 37-38

⁷⁶ Cole 2013, pp. 60

parents to be raised as equal as possible. If even, when suggested by a counsellor that a child might need special education, this is refused by the parents, how can a child with a slightly abnormal hobby or preference hope to be accepted as he or she is? And not only the parents, also society seems to not accept ‘strangeness’ according to anime, if we look at *No Game No Life*, *Sakurasou no Petto na Kanojo*, *Rozen Maiden* and *Denpa Kyōshi*.

As far as professional treatment goes, none returns in any of the anime I have researched. The best similar event is where Misaki counsels Satō in *Welcome to the N.H.K!*. In the case of withdrawal in middle or high school, where it coincides with truancy, teachers are tasked with bringing the student back to school. While this is (mostly) successful in anime like *Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei*, *Denpa Kyōshi*, and even older, same-setting series like *Great Teacher Onizuka* (although in the manga only), it often goes hand-in-hand with special, non-regular methods and attention, something that would only happen because it is anime. But perhaps this is exactly an advice towards society; that non-standard methods are most effective. The lack of presence of professional treatment in anime may also be a reflection of the lack thereof in reality as argued by Borovoy⁷⁷ and Zielenziger⁷⁸.

Amae returns in many anime concerning *hikikomori*. In *Welcome to the N.H.K!*, as I argued in chapter two, Satō is vastly dependent on the money sent by his parents and the goodwill of his mother and later Misaki, and Megumi’s *hikikomori* brother is completely dependent on Megumi, occasionally seen throwing a fuss when she does not comply to his liking. Even in *No Game No Life* we can see similar dependence by Sora and Shiro in Stephanie, as they task her with taking care of them, and eventually she comes to volunteer to do so. Similarly, in *Rozen Maiden* it is Jun’s sister who takes care of him, and in *Denpa Onna to Seishun Otoko* Erio is taken care of by her cousin Makoto.

Social pressure, be it indirectly by society or more directly by one’s parents or family, is one of the large arguments of Zielenziger in his view on how Japanese society has ‘created’

⁷⁷ Borovoy 2008, pp. 556-557

⁷⁸ Zielenziger 2006, pp. 33-34

this ‘lost generation’ of social shut-ins. The harsh Japanese society causes young people to be unable to cope with the path spread out for them, and have no choice but to retreat in their homes to hide and recover. This form of direct criticism towards the Japanese society is rare, even among Western scholars, but definitely among Japanese scholars like Saitō. Even in his foreword to the 2013 translation of his book, he does not mention this view on the problem. Also in anime, direct criticism towards society is very uncommon, except for one; *No Game No Life*. As I have mentioned in chapter two, *No Game No Life* is unique in its critique on society, stating the absurd and unfair state of society as the main cause for the protagonists’ withdrawal. Moreover, by placing the protagonists in another world, with a (very) different society where they are able to prosper and even recover from their anthropophobia, this critique is further emphasized. Also in academic literature the problematic situation of youngsters in Japanese society is receiving more attention, as we can see in Toivonen’s 2011 article on the working situation for young people in Japan. It may be a bit far-fetched, but perhaps the reason *No Game No Life* was popular enough to be made into an anime was not just because of the well-written story, but also because this form of criticism on Japan’s society is slowly being recognized and accepted by society itself.

An interesting event concerning *hikikomori* is portrayed in the anime *Higashi no Eden*. Here, around 20.000 *hikikomori*, or as they are called, reclusive N.E.E.T.s, are forcefully removed from their homes by the main character prior to the storyline, and made dress up as government officials in order to help evacuate a whole city block that is about to be bombed, and consequently moved to Dubai for several months to stay out of sight from Japan. As we can see from the words of one of these N.E.E.T.s who grudgingly thanks the protagonist, Takizawa, for the experience, as it helped him reintegrate with society, having been both forcefully taken out of their reclusive state and put into a different society (Dubai) has helped them rehabilitate. Also, as is insinuated in the last episode where the 20.000 N.E.E.T.s’ collective knowledge is used to counter a missile attack, their knowledge and prowess can be valuable to society, and is therefore worth investing in.

This is a similar image as is portrayed in *No Game No Life* where the *hikikomori* protagonists become King and Queen of the human race, and consequently revive the country with their knowledge gained from games. This image is vastly different from what is seen in many scholarly writings and as heard from Japanese themselves: that *hikikomori* are often seen as lazy and simply unwilling to work, study or any other kind of effort; a concept also strongly rejected by most scholars like Saitō and Zielenziger, but an image sadly still part of Japanese society.

The only aspect of the image of *hikikomori* in real society that is hard to find in anime is violence. Especially after the murders and kidnapping connected to *hikikomori* in the early 2000s (see chapter one) the image was very bad. And even without that, domestic violence by *hikikomori* is a problem often reported by scholars⁷⁹. While tantrums thrown by *hikikomori* are occasionally found in anime⁸⁰, none of the series I have analysed here show actual domestic violence. Perhaps it is something that the Japanese are ashamed of, or simply prefer not to show on television. Or perhaps the image of *hikikomori* is simply not as violent and dangerous anymore as it once was. I would like to think of the latter, while knowing that domestic violence does occur occasionally, as it would create a more positive view towards the *hikikomori*.

Fieldwork and the challenges of recovery

Looking at what the opportunities to escape from *hikikomori* are, the anime are slightly more elaborate than the academic literature. In academic literature it has surprised me how little is written on successful methods of rehabilitation from withdrawal. In most works, only the problem itself and its causes are elaborated upon, and the social image and some form of criticism are mentioned. Saitō and Zielenziger are the only ones who really go into the topic of rehabilitation, but with Saitō it stays at the level of a guide of advice, whereas Zielenziger is able to give personal examples of patients he has worked with and have been able to escape their reclusive lifestyle to some extent.

⁷⁹ Borovoy 2008, p. 569; Saitō 2013

⁸⁰ Welcome to the N.H.K! 2006, Rozen Maiden 2004

During my time in Japan in 2015-16 I have tried to meet with (parents of) *hikikomori* through several connections I have made there. While I was only successful in meeting one person related to a *hikikomori*, the experience has given me a very clear view on the difficulties patients and their families have while in this situation. The woman I met had a son who had been in a *hikikomori*-state for over eight years. It had started late in high school, as the son succumbed to the pressure placed on him as his older brothers and cousins had been successful in their school and work career, and the same was expected of him. Initially having worked hard to meet the expectation, he eventually could not handle it, and over the course of several months became more and more reclusive. The mother, initially not paying too much attention to the situation, eventually got worried about her son, and tried to get him out of withdrawal. When that did not bear fruit, she started to do research on what was ailing her son and sought help. Through a lot of trial and error, and eventually building a bond of trust with her son, they were able to work towards helping him out of reclusion, and he is now happily married and has a job.

One of the important things the mother, whom I will not refer to by name as to honour her privacy, has said to me, is that the process in which a child comes out of withdrawal is lengthy, and should not be rushed, but neither left alone. She is currently a volunteer at a regional group to help parents of *hikikomori* children. From her personal experience with other parents she told me it takes at least the same amount of time as the *hikikomori* child has been a recluse to help them out. And on that path are many obstacles one must challenge, as recognition of the social problem is still not granted often, and the reclusive state of a child is still often blamed on the unwillingness of the child, or on bad parenting.

In the light of recovering from *hikikomori*, I argue that the requirement of effort can be recognized in anime as well; It takes Satō in *Welcome to the N.H.K!* a lot of time to even be able to go outside by himself -not counting the mandatory short nightly trips to the convenience store- and it is the continued efforts of his friends that help him to do so. Important is, that previous to the series, he had already been in this state for nearly four years, and this is a recurring element in most series, where the *hikikomori* state is an enduring one at the start of the

series. It is usually an event in the story of the anime, be it a transfer to another world as in *No Game No Life* or a broken keyboard during O-bon like in *Mekakucity Actors*, which triggers the recluses to start interacting with the outside world again, and often forces them to do so.

In *Denpa Kyōshi* and *Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei* it is the teacher who gives the student opportunity to come out of withdrawal, sometimes going as far as creating a setting where the *hikikomori* is accepted by his classmates as seen in the former. Depending on the level of social anxiety or anthropophobia the rehabilitation can be quicker⁸¹ or slower⁸². In the end it is the cooperation of the people around them and opportunities that force change in their lifestyle that seem to be the main contributors to allow *hikikomori* to rehabilitate.

Japanese society, anime and their producers

To what extent can we say that anime, or in extension popular culture, is a representative of Japanese Society? And in such, are these anime a proper representative of the image of *hikikomori* in Japanese society?

Manga, in Japanese popular culture, has often been the bases for many anime produced, and are thus strongly connected. Looking at the work of Sharon Kinsella on *adult manga*, she argues how manga, particularly the manga aimed at (young) adults, have been intricately connected to Japanese society for over five decades. Particularly in the chapter on the genre of *information manga* she describes how politics and economy have been influencing the stories of manga and reversely the manga had been affecting future generations⁸³. Kinsella argues that “rather than being an accidental reflection of a national, or racial (Japanese) psyche, that just *somehow* surfaced, manga is the end product of a series of complicated conscious social exchanges and intelligent cultural management.”⁸⁴ Examples of direct influence from society to manga are, for instance, the fact that in the 1980s there was a wide array of educational manga sponsored by government agencies, as well as other new adult manga genres emerging around

⁸¹ Sakurasō 2012, *Denpa Onna to Seishun Otoko* 2011

⁸² *Welcome to the N.H.K!* 2006, *Rozen Maiden* 2004

⁸³ Kinsella 2000, chapter 3, pp. 70-101

⁸⁴ Kinsella 2000, p. 14

that time on matters of politics and economy, including *documentary* manga, *business* manga, *economics* manga and *politics* manga. These manga would often orient themselves with recent events and use realistic settings⁸⁵. Reversely, such manga also at times influenced society, for example when former Minister of Finance Hata Tsutomu said he had used the best-selling business manga *Osaka Way of Finance* (*Naniwa Kin'yūdō*, 1990-1995) by Aoki Yūji as a source of tips and insights during his position⁸⁶. While this may concern only one part of all the manga produced in Japan, it is one of the bases for the importance of the manga culture in Japanese adult society, as manga are as commonly consumed as newspapers.

It is manga, as Condry argues, that relies most on the feedback loop between producer and audience. Quoting an editor of the Kyoto Seika university magazine, he explains how, as manga are cheap and easily accessible for free in convenience stores or bookstores, promoters and critics are far less influent on the readers, making a hit in the manga economy based of true interest by people, to the extent that one buys a manga to read it again and let others read it⁸⁷. Also, quite different from, for example, the U.S., where strict codes on creating comics were laid down in 1954 to ban extreme violence, gore, and non-standard sexual themes or romance from comics, Japan's manga had complete freedom in developing a vast range of genres, creating a de facto literaturesque collection of what is better called 'Graphic Novels' in English⁸⁸.

As both Suzan Napier and Ian Condry argue, manga has been an important basis for many anime produced⁸⁹. Moreover, as Condry argues in his book *The Soul of Anime*, anime is not just created by their directors or original manga authors, it is an intricate web of parties in Japanese society, perhaps even global society, that create anime and their popularity. According to Condry, no success is guaranteed in the economy of anime. Even successful companies like

⁸⁵ Kinsella 2000, p.79

⁸⁶ Kinsella 2000, p. 83

⁸⁷ Condry 2013, p. 107

⁸⁸ Condry 2013, pp. 108-109

⁸⁹ Napier 2005, p. 7

studio Ghibli face uncertainty towards the success of their next work⁹⁰. And even works that were initially deemed a failure in their branch, as the then avant-garde *Mobile Suit Gundam* (*kidō senshi gendamu*, 1979-80), which was meant to be turned into toys to sell to young people, became a huge success after the plastic model company Bandai experimented with creating model kits of the huge robots featured in the series, which quickly became popular among young adults⁹¹.

What Condry argues here is that anime's success is not only decided by the success and quality of the original story or the skill of the director or studio, but also by the common interest of target groups in society. The plastic model kits for the *Gundam* series gave it enough popularity to have new series produced to this very day, roughly thirty-five years later. Similarly, the *Sailor Moon* (1992-1993) series on magical girls was a forerunner on creating series where the transformation wands and similar objects from the series were sold as toys to young girls. To transfer this to the anime discussed in this thesis, a simple search on *EBay* for "No Game No Life" will show a vast array of figures and other products connected to the series, implicating the popularity the series enjoys. *Welcome to the N.H.K!* on the other hand shows little merchandise available, indicating a different audience.

Condry's theory on the success and popularity of anime is far more comprehensive than simply looking at the direct relation between anime and society. Napier, on the other hand, questions how anime can be seen as a means to "understand some of the current concerns abounding in present-day Japanese society"⁹². She argues that while "anime texts entertain audiences around the world on the most basic level,[...] equally important, they also move and provoke viewers on other levels as well, stimulating audiences to work through certain contemporary issues in ways that older art forms cannot."⁹³ Napier goes on to argue that anime is a 'useful mirror on contemporary Japanese society, indicating that, at least to some extent, we

⁹⁰ Condry 2013, p. 88

⁹¹ Condry 2013, pp. 123-127

⁹² Napier 2005, p. 3

⁹³ Napier 2005, p. 4

can understand what we see in anime as a reflection of thoughts and problems lingering in the minds of the Japanese.

Another topic brought up by Condry is the relationship with ‘the real’ in anime. As seen with the more realistic approach for *Gundam* which was more popular among young adults and adults, using ‘realistic’ topics in fantasy or science fiction settings gained much popularity in the seventies and eighties, to the point where the question became ‘what is more real?’. It was in these types of anime where difficult topics like war and politics were explored and criticized, something that appealed more to adults⁹⁴. This, too, is part of what Condry argues as ‘sustainable creative networks’, the core that creates anime’s popularity, claiming “in some ways, what ultimately constitutes the real in anime were those examples that could garner a grownup audience and turn a profit.”⁹⁵ It is what Kinsella also argues on adult manga being ‘more realistic than reality and more political than politics’⁹⁶, where we can see that manga and, in the same way, anime, will sometimes portray topics more clearly than they are treated in society.

Perhaps similarities can be found in the topics of social problems, like the phenomenon of *hikikomori*. As the consciousness of society changes, so seems to change the way *hikikomori* are represented, and perhaps the change towards a more positive view on *hikikomori* and more critical view on society is also simply what has recently been popular and of interest to young adults in Japan. Where *Welcome to the N.H.K!* is a slice-of-life satire on the life of a *hikikomori*, clearly aimed at a more adult audience, *No Game No Life* features a fantasy world where contrasts with the real society are clearly marked but packaged in a way that the series can be enjoyed by a younger audience as well, and has room for merchandising.

What we can understand from the works of Napier, Kinsella and Condry on Japanese popular culture is that these works of anime, often based on manga and light-novels, most likely present a representation of what Japanese society ‘thinks’ on the topic of *hikikomori*. While it

⁹⁴ Condry 2013, p 126

⁹⁵ Condry 2013, pp. 118-119

⁹⁶ Kinsella 2000, p. 90

may reflect only the thoughts of a minority, the popularity of the original novels was enough to have it made into an anime; a process, as Condry explains, is a very lengthy and costly job which many people have to work on for several months at a time⁹⁷. Also, as the audiences are often young adults (*No Game No Life*) to adults (*Welcome to the N.H.K!*), topics on social problems like *hikikomori* will be taken more seriously by the readers.

Summary

Anime's portrayal of *hikikomori* has many similarities with the actual phenomenon in society. If one would compare the knowledge on *hikikomori* we derive from anime with what we know from academic literature, what is surprising is how anime is perhaps a step ahead of the literature in its understanding and criticism. At the same time, some parts of the discussion in literature, like the matter of domestic violence, are not portrayed in the works we have discussed here. Still, is what we see in anime not just a figment of a single person's thoughts, a story of fantasy, not related to society? I certainly think not, as we can see that not only is anime commonly seen as a mirror to contemporary society as argued by Napier, and more and more often are anime discussed in connection to Japanese society in academic literature; looking at the works of Kinsella and Condry we can see that both anime and manga are closely connected, influenced by and influencing society more than one would initially suspect. Popular culture, especially works like anime and manga with more serious settings aimed at young adults and adults, are not only influenced by what happens in society, the way we see in Ellis' discussion on *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, but also seem to exert significant influence on the readers/viewers, and, to some extent, society itself.

⁹⁷ Condry 2013, Introduction

Conclusion

The *hikikomori*-phenomenon has clearly been influencing storytelling in anime for the past two decades, with the last decade being the most prominent. While more often used as a side- or support-character setting (like in *Shinseiki Evangelion*) or starting point for development (*Rozen Maiden*, *Mekakucity Actors*), the *hikikomori* occasionally reaches the role of (one of) the main character(s) and the phenomenon becomes a large part of the storyline, as we can see in *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life*. Also on other media platforms, like manga, we can see such stories emerging in, for example, the by Heinze and Thomas argued *Maetel no Kimochi*⁹⁸, and both *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life* are also based on light novels that have manga adaptations. This multi-platform shape of popular culture is common to Japan, and goes even further according to Condry's theory on collaborative creativity.

Is the way *hikikomori* are portrayed in Japanese popular culture different, or perhaps, even, more positive, than we can find described in academic literature? I think we find in this thesis that many aspects of the *hikikomori*-phenomenon described in scholarly work are reflected in the series I have reviewed. Bullying being a common cause and truancy preceding social withdrawal are common in both fields. Also the insecurity towards society and one-sided dependence on parents or other close relations are examples of a similar nature portrayed in anime as compared to academic literature. Proper psychiatric treatment is as absent in anime as it is most times in reality as argued by Borovoy and Zielenziger⁹⁹.

If I were to point out the differences, then the absence of domestic violence in anime and negative tone towards *hikikomori* are interesting differences. In none of the mentioned anime we can see any form of domestic violence by *hikikomori*, opposing Borovoy's and Saitō's discussion of such events¹⁰⁰. It may be that anime are seen unsuitable for such events, though, considering the many genres anime partake in, I find that somewhat doubtful. I suspect it is a

⁹⁸ Heinze and Thomas 2014, pp. 163-165

⁹⁹ Borovoy 2008, pp. 556-557; Zielenziger 2006, pp. 33-34

¹⁰⁰ Borovoy 2008, p. 569; Saitō 2013

side that either no authors prefer to be shown, or is seen as only a small part of the social problem. More research may be needed for this particular point.

The negative tone towards *hikikomori* is something that is made clear in most works, particularly in the works of Horiguchi and Micheal Zielenziger. Generally *hikikomori* seem to receive little positive attention, and are mainly seen as work-shy parasites and dangerous to the economy and sometimes even society. It is therefore peculiar that some anime, particularly *Higashi no Eden* and *No Game No Life* show a far more positive portrayal of these youths. In recent series it seems to be depicted that not the *hikikomori*-patient himself is responsible for his withdrawal, but outside influences were and often still are the main cause of making them a recluse. The allowed dependence on parents (*amae*), bullying that is not kept in check, the harsh looks from society towards *hikikomori* and last but not least the rigid system that Japanese youth has to adjust to, in order to be successful are all elements that are brought forward by anime. And it seems that where *Welcome to the N.H.K!* was still critical on the *hikikomori*-patient himself, more recent anime sketch a continuously more positive view on the qualities and potential of *hikikomori* that society has blocked off.

Michael Zielenziger was one of the first scholars to write a book from the point of view of the *hikikomori*, putting little blame on them and mostly on the dysfunctionality of Japanese society. Ever since, Western scholars have slowly adopted this point of view, as the problems surrounding the *hikikomori* are more often researched from a deficit in Japanese society, as with the shame culture discussed by Cole, eventually leading up to Toivonen's recent article on the state of the Japanese business society where he argues how little chance Japanese youths have while experiencing high pressure and expectations. Sadly, even in the preface to the 2013 translation of his 1998 work on *hikikomori*, Saitō does not take a similar critical point of view of his own country's society. And indeed, as I have noticed in my conversations with people related to (former) *hikikomori* and those working in the field, there is still little understanding from the general public towards these unfortunate souls trapped in seclusion.

It is therefore that the more and more positive portrayal of *hikikomori* in anime and other parts of Japanese popular culture is, for me, a hope that the image of *hikikomori* in Japanese society is slowly changing for the better. It is popular culture that is argued by Suzan Napier to be mirror to society, and perhaps for the socially private Japanese this is all the more true. Moreover, as Condry argues, success and popularity of a work of popular culture, particularly anime, is always a multi-aspect process, where the creator and consumer both play an important role.

It is because of that, I argue, that costly processes like making anime, for stories on *hikikomori* that are deemed popular by the public through their original manga or books, and considered interesting or worthwhile by anime companies to animate, may show the direction society's view on *hikikomori* is headed. While nothing is certain, I certainly pray this social problem will receive the proper attention, and that these individuals will be accepted into society for who they are in a way they can contribute to it.

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Sayonara Zetsubō Sensei, First broadcast 8 July 2007, Directed by Shinbō Akiyuki, Original work by Kumeta Kōji.

Ms. W. 2013

Ms. W. “Shinjite, makasete, matsu.” *Typoscript of presentation on experience with a hikikomori son*, dated 12-12-2013

Appendix: Summaries of *Welcome to the N.H.K!* and *No Game No Life*

Welcome to the N.H.K!

Welcome to the N.H.K! revolves around the university dropout Satō, who at the start of the story is holed up inside his room, half-asleep, forced to listen to an anime-song endlessly repeated from his neighbour's room. While cooped up in his room the whole day, he only goes out to get groceries at the local convenience store. Satō has been a *hikikomori* since his freshman year, currently in his fourth year since. Most of the day he sleeps, dreaming about conspiracies that have led him to be in this state. Too afraid to go out and confront other people, he cannot even visit his neighbour to tell him to turn off the loud music.

One day he accidentally opens the door and an old lady and her niece, who try to warn him about so called N.E.E.T. -socially reclusive people not in education, employment or training- who have become a social problem lately. Feeling accused, he snaps at the old lady and slams the door to be left alone. Still, he is triggered and decides to try applying for a job at a manga café. The one at the counter, however, is none other than the niece of the previous old lady. Still ashamed for his behaviour he runs back home, regretting his decision of trying to find a job. The girl, Misaki, contacts him however, and proposes to cure him of his *hikikomori* state. After initial reluctance he agrees, and they start having sessions in a nearby park.

Nakahara Misaki is a seventeen-years-old high school girl. She had seen Satō sitting in the park late at night several times a week, and had recognized him at first when she and her aunt had been at Satō's door, and later when he came to the manga café. At first Misaki seems to be just an ordinary girl out to help Satō out of curiosity, but it is later revealed that Misaki herself is a *futōkō*, a truant, who investigates Satō's condition as a means to both figure out what to do with herself and to cure her inferiority complex, as she sees Satō as someone who is worth even less than herself. Through a rough childhood with an alcoholic and abusive stepfather, and a mother who supposedly committed suicide when she was young, she has had trouble adjusting to society and school, even when coming to live with her aunt and uncle.

At first Satō is in denial of being a *hikikomori*, refusing to sign the contract Misaki had given him to start the counselling sessions. This causes him to want to prove to Misaki that he actually has a job, but simply works from home, calling himself a creator. When he later that same night gathers his courage and bursts into his neighbour's room to tell him to turn off the anime song, he finds out it is none other than his high school buddy Yamazaki Kaoru. Kaoru, as a heavy anime and game addict, or *otaku*, is enrolled in a game-design college, and Satō sees his chance at proving his lies to Misaki by making a game, and Yamazaki, hyped by the idea, agrees to work together. On a trip to Akihabara, as a form of introducing Satō to *otaku* culture, Satō encounters his high school upperclassmen Kashiwa Hitomi. When asked what he is up to lately, he confesses to being a *hikikomori*. When the game creation subsequently also does not go as well as planned, Satō decides to tell the truth and signs the contract with Misaki after all.

Through the sessions with Misaki, Satō becomes more and more able to leave the house, visiting Yamazaki's college once to find out if he really has a girlfriend as Misaki claimed, is able to face his mother when she comes to visit Tokyo, and goes to watch the summer fireworks with Misaki. Of course setbacks follow as well, as Satō feels extremely pressured after being forced to participate in a class in Yamazaki's college, and especially when he finds out that Misaki has been able to spy on him the whole time, as her house is right on the top of the hill with a clear view on both the park as well as his and Yamazaki's rooms. This last setback even makes him decide to cut all ties with Misaki and go on a trip with his upperclassmen Hitomi to escape her. This trip, however, turns out to be a group suicide and amusingly enough it is through Satō's efforts, as well as the help of Hitomi's boyfriend, Misaki and Yamazaki, that the whole group returns home safe.

While slowly picking up the sessions with Misaki again, Satō gets addicted to online gaming, only to be brought to reality by Yamazaki, and not soon after is caught in a pyramid scheme at the hand of his former class president Megumi. After being helped out of the scheme by Misaki and Yamaguchi, it is revealed that Megumi got caught up herself in an attempt to help out her own *hikikomori* brother.

At the end of the series, Yamazaki gets called back to his hometown to take over his parents' farm, and Misaki, feeling Satō's need of her help diminishing, attempts to make a new contract with Satō forcing him to fall in love with her. His refusal causes her to attempt suicide. While Satō finds out the truth about Misaki's past from her uncle, Misaki runs away to where her mother committed suicide with the intention to do so too, but Satō chases after her and is able to convince her not to. In the end, the two build a bond of trust, and while their situations are far from resolved, they can now work towards those goals together.

No Game No Life

The main characters in *No Game No Life* are Sora and Shiro, two *hikikomori* siblings and game addicts that form the invincible gamer duo 「 」（blank or *kūhaku*), who have become an urban legend over the internet. The story starts by showing an in-game battle where 「 」（blank or *kūhaku*) defeats 1200 players with just four of theirs, making their opponents wonder what kind of amazing players they were up against. It is quickly revealed, however, that the “amazing” gamers are simple recluses that do nothing but game for several days at a time.

The little sister, Shiro, is an eleven-year-old child genius who is able to speak eighteen languages and is able to beat the most difficult computer programs at chess. The older brother, Sora, is a N.E.E.T. with a knack at reading people's intentions to an extent that he can manipulate them. The two have been ostracized by society; Shiro was bullied for being too smart and different from all the others her age or even any age, Sora was shunned for being too talkative. Having lost all hope in living normally in a society they see as nothing more than a rule- and goalless game with seven billion players just doing whatever they want, they have chosen to seek comfort in playing games while secluded in their little room.

It is on just another day in their lives that they receive a challenge from an unknown opponent, who seems to know their identity as siblings, challenging them to a game of chess, while asking the question “Have you siblings ever felt as if you were born into the wrong world?” After barely winning this game, something they see as rare, they are asked what they

think of society. How do they like their world? Is it fun, and easy to live in? They are asked what they would think about a world with clear rules and parameters, where everything was decided through simple games. Sora answers that if such a world would exist, they had been born in the wrong world. Suddenly their screens turn blank, and they are teleported to a different world.

The world the siblings end up in is called Disboard. It is a world where Teto, the god of play, rules, after having remained as the only survivor in the war for the title of 'One True God' (*yuitsu no kami*). As one who abhors violence in all its forms, he was the only god who had not participated, making him the winner. When named the One True God, he put ten rules into place that forbade murder, violence and theft, and made conflict only resolvable through games with equalling wagers. Sixteen sentient races live in the world of Disboard, and those races are bound by these ten 'covenants'.

Sora and Shiro are left by Teto on a clifftop, from where they need to fend for themselves. They quickly are familiarized with the workings of the world, as soon they are challenged by street robbers to a game. When arriving in Elkia, the only remaining human city, a gambling tournament to decide the next king is happening. While observing how Stephanie Dola, granddaughter of the previous king, is losing from Clammy Zell, a girl using a friendly elf's magic to win in said tournament, Sora procures money and a room in the inn through a game of poker. On their way up to their room, Sora whispers in Stephanie's ear that she is being cheated on.

Later that night Stephanie visits the siblings' room, having lost her game to Clammy, she wishes to know how she was cheated on; only if cheating is found and proven during a game, the cheater loses. As Stephanie did not know how, she still lost in the end. After a quick game Rock-paper-scissors with Sora, who makes Stephanie fall in love with him in order to make her take care of the siblings accommodations, Sora and Stephanie get into an awkward situation making Stephanie kick the former out of the room. This results in both of the siblings

getting an anxiety attack from being apart, which is healed only when Stephanie reopens the door to the hallway allowing them to see one another.

After being invited to Steph's home and having familiarized themselves with the written language, the siblings realize that the country looks poor. Stephanie teaches them that the human land was once several countries big, but had been lost through games over the decades, and now only Elkia remains. It is now up to the next king, who would have to be the king of gamblers, to retrieve the lost territory, or the human race would be doomed. Humans are the weakest among the sixteen races, as they have no affinity with magical power whatsoever, and cannot even sense it being used. Clammy using elven magic to win the throne concerns the siblings, as it might cause the human land to be lost to the elves almost immediately after having arrived to this world. Consequently, out of curiosity and the simple fact of not wanting to have their stay get boring so quickly, they take up the challenge to become king of Elkia, and challenge Clammy.

They beat Clammy and become King and Queen, and with that the representatives of the human race, and at their coronation issue a challenge out to all the other races. In the next few days they learn as much as they can about the country, and beat a Flügel (rank six race) to win over a library as the books in the castle are not enough to find out enough about the Werebeast country they wish to challenge. That country had taken much of humanity's territory in recent years, and was the third largest on the planet. Also, being ranked only fourteenth of the sixteen races, they were by far the easiest prey, not to mention Sora's personal interest in the half-animals.

They eventually challenge the Werebeasts, who invite them to a game of VR-gaming. Initially the game seems doomed, as the setting is akin to modern-day Tōkyō (a nightmare to any anthropophobic *hikikomori*) but as it is only Virtual Reality they quickly recover, and eventually win the game, and subsequently the allegiance of the Werebeasts.