Suicide Livestreams in *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD*

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we argue that ludic representations of suicide livestreams serve as communicative appeals for recognising a streamer's suffering. These appeals can take the form of a metanarrative critique of a character's behaviour, of the societal forms the livestream exists within, and of the player's actions and choices. To argue this point, we perform a close playing (Aarseth 2003) of the Japanese story-based adventure videogame *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD* (WSS Playground 2022), in which Ame, a mentally ill young woman, tries to make a career out of livestreaming in Japan while the player is cast as her lover and producer. The game has a variety of endings that are determined by the player's choices, and we focus on two endings where Ame livestreams her suicide, as well as on the game's 'true' ending where she stops obeying the player and finds happiness by herself.

In particular, we focus on the processes (Aarseth & Calleja 2015) necessary to achieve those endings, the representation of Ame's suicidal process (Wasserman 2016) in response to the player's actions, and in the unfolding of the suicide livestream (Starcevic & Aboujaoude 2015) itself. Through this close reading, we find a paradoxical critique that simultaneously blames individuals and social structures. On the one hand, the game's representations of the suicidal process frames Ame's worsening mental state as a personal shortcoming; a result of bad choices. On the other, its representations of suicide livestreams—by making the suicide visible and public without revealing the suicidal process to the livestream's audience—serve as a critique of Japanese sociocultural constrains, particularly the shame of failure and dismissal of women's mental health problems as attention-seeking. This duality manifests in the player's role in Ame's suicide.

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MENTAL HEALTH AND ITS TROPES IN JAPAN

The suicide livestreams in *NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD* exist within two discursive constructions of abnormality in Japan: *hikikomori* and *menhera*. *Hikikomori* refers to 'shut-ins,' people who isolate themselves in their rooms and who stereotypically lack social relationships and are internet addicts (Kawakami and Shimazu 2021; Saitō 2013; Tajan 2021). *Menhera*, a portmanteau of "mental health-er," derogatively refers to someone suffering from mental illness. The term has become associated with fictional depictions of mentally unstable, impulsive, and promiscuous young women in *seinen manga*[1] who self-harm (Seko & Kikuchi 2021; 2022). Both of these phenomena manifest in Ame, who is both a shut-in who spends most of her time online and an unstable young woman who, in response to the player's actions, can be driven to self-cutting.

These two phenomena manifest in the two endings featuring suicide livestreams in different ways. While these livestreams unfold very differently, consisting of different lengths, different methods of suicide, and different degrees of transparency surrounding Ame's distress, they both consist of a communicative appeal against external social pressures. A central part of the discursive construction of *hikikomori* as a stigmatised condition is a focus on individual "failure" and "refusal" to be a part of society (Berman & Rizzo 2019), while the stigmatising construction of *menhera* is a focus on self-cutting and other forms of distress communication as attention-seeking behaviour (Seko & Kikuchi 2022). In the game, suicide livestreams serve the communicative role of correcting (mis)representations of Ame by her fictional audience.

The act of suicide itself can serve to be free from (mis)representation by asserting a disavowed subjectivity through the desire to die (Jaworski 2015), and this potential is amplified through the communicative appeals of the suicide livestream. In the game, suicide livestreams are an appeal against (mis)representation as a 'failed' streamer who cannot attract an audience by relying on the fact that suicide livestreams become shock material and are viewed and discussed far beyond the time of broadcast (Fratini & Hemer 2020). They also correct the (mis)representation of Ame's distress as attention seeking by exposing her audience to self-harm (Kilby 2001) and traumatising them through on-screen violence (Lester 2015a; 2015b). In correcting (mis)representations, suicide livestreams directly address the social structures that (mis)represent suicidal individuals by suggesting death as a way to escape them.

PLAYER RESPONSIBILITY

The gameplay process necessary to achieve the suicide livestreams, however, doubles down on the stigmatising notions present in both *hikikomori* and *menhera*. As the game's 'true' ending suggests that the player does not exist as an in-game character, but as an entity Ame created as a coping mechanism, it frames the player's choices that worsen Ame's life and mental health as her fault. This change rather simplistically suggests that the origin of Ame's problems is not societal, but an explicitly individual shortcoming. Despite this displacement of blame, the player is still responsible for, and complicit in, her suicide, as they still control her for most of the game (Sicart 2009; 2013).

So, while the player's involvement in Ame's life is used as a way to frame *hikikomori* and *menhera* individuals' struggles as self-inflicted, the suicide livestreams—which

start and develop without the player's input—serve as societal critiques of the various structures of blame at play. While the player is not held directly accountable for their responsibility over Ame's suicide—the game encourages the player to lead Ame to these endings—they are presented with the potential space for a moral and emotional reflection on their ethical involvement and on the societal issues at play in the suicide livestreams.

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ENDNOTES

[1] *Seinen manga* are comics from Japan written for young men between the ages of 18 and 30 years old (Seko & Kikuchi 2020, 357).