Getting Hitched to “Love Plus”

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IDS-403-J7172: Technology and Society

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April 16, 2023

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In November of 2009, popular technology blog Boing Boing published an article (Katayama, 2009b) claiming that a man in Tokyo had married Nene Anegasaki, one of the three main characters of the Nintendo DS video game *Love Plus*. The ceremony was officiated by a priest, attended in person by guests, and streamed online on a Japanese video-sharing service (Stasieńko, 2015, p. 80). This event became a national news story across multiple English-speaking countries, as television networks and wire services interviewed the man and tried to determine why he had done this (Lah, 2009; Meyers, 2009; Moore, 2009). Was the man lonely? Delusional? Did he truly believe that Anegasaki—who wore her high-school uniform to the proceedings (Katayama, 2009a, 0:16)—loved him back? Scholars remain unsure whether the man was serious in his vows, or whether he had staged the event as a kind of satire of his relationship with the game (Gn, 2014, para. 2). Still, it seems clear that the man formed some kind of deep connection to this character simply by playing a video game.

The idea of someone falling in love with a video game character may bring to mind some kind of complex artificial intelligence that can understand and respond to users. But the technology underlying *Love Plus* (2009) is far simpler: it is a "visual novel", a kind of storytelling technology based on multiple-choice questions (Camingue et al., 2021). The characters in the game speak pre-recorded lines and, occasionally, ask the player to select from one of a few possible options. The player might choose to go to the bowling alley instead of the karaoke parlor, or to compliment their girlfriend's outfit instead of criticizing it. Based on the player's response, the game selects an appropriate "branch" of the story to display. The game stores various long-term variables to further customize the available options and responses. For example, if the player repeatedly selects impolite options, characters in the game will start to use

angry-sounding lines of dialogue and refuse to go on dates with them. *Love Plus* can also use the Nintendo DS's real time clock to display story scenes at specific real-world dates and times, and it can insert the player's name into spoken dialogue in an awkward, halting manner reminiscent of early-2000s telephone answering machines. (It even recognizes short phrases like "I love you" using the Nintendo DS microphone, but the unofficial English translation patch I used did not support this feature.) Ultimately, though, the game is more similar to a book or movie than any kind of advanced AI chatbot—which makes its connections with players all the more unexpected.

Love Plus is like many other forms of media in that it both *shapes* and *is shaped by* social and cultural influences (McGivern, 2016). Dating simulation video games with multiple-choice dialogue options were relatively popular in the Japanese "otaku" subculture, even prior to its release (Taylor, 2007, pp. 192-194). Moreover, the idea of a "hikikomori"—a member of the "otaku" subculture who rejects social interaction in favor of substitutes like dating simulation games—has *itself* appeared in fictional media aimed at this group (Hairston, 2010), as well as fictional depictions by American authors (Gallagher & Caston, 2001). However, one important difference separates *Love Plus* from the games depicted in these previous works: its real-time clock feature. Most visual novels are designed as stories with a defined beginning, middle, and end (Taylor, 2007, pp. 194-195). Players could imagine themselves to be in an ongoing relationship with a character—just as some people imagine relationships with television characters (Kosnáč, 2016)—but this was clearly not the intended mode of interaction with these games. *Love Plus*, on the other hand, explicitly encourages this behavior in its design. The core narrative loop asks players to check in with their "girlfriend" on a daily basis, schedules dates with them on a real-world calendar, and celebrates holidays with them. Authors of subsequent

visual novel games credit *Love Plus* with popularizing this kind of real-time dating simulation gameplay (Bee, 2013), and it could be argued that this served to normalize parasocial relationship behaviors in its audience.

Of the four general education lenses, I believe the social science lens will provide the most productive analysis of *Love Plus* and its role in the marriage event. There is an existing body of psychological research about why people choose to play romance-oriented video games and feel attracted to two-dimensional characters more generally (Koike et al., 2020; Giard, 2020). The other lenses are less attractive. As discussed above, the technology underpinning *Love Plus* is rather boring, so examining it using the applied sciences lens will probably not reveal very much. The development of *Love Plus* (and visual novels generally) is quite recent, which makes it difficult to produce a compelling historical analysis. And deeply analyzing *Love Plus* as an artistic work would be challenging because the game is only available in Japanese, it includes a large number of different branching paths, and it is designed to be experienced in real time over the course of several months. I just wouldn't have time to read it all.

It can be challenging to distill a complex topic like this one into a single thesis statement. Tentatively, the hypothesis I propose to combine the various elements of my analysis is the following: "While 'hikikomori' and parasocial relationships did exist prior to the release of *Love Plus*, the game's unique combination of visual novel and real-time clock technologies served to normalize and amplify these maladaptive social behaviors in its audience, as demonstrated by the widely publicized wedding of a Tokyo man to one of its characters."

Analysis

To analyze this event through the lens of social science, we can examine the impact it had on the people who played *Love Plus* and on society in general. Fans of television shows and

video games often engage in participatory activities such as creating artwork or interacting on social media (Bury, 2018). In Japan, one popular participatory activity is known locally as *contents tourism*: visiting locations in the real world that are associated with fictional stories (Graburn & Yamamura, 2020, p. 2). Contents tourism has been embraced both by fans, who jokingly describe their trips as "sacred site pilgrimages" (Nishijima, 2020, p. 28), and by Japanese government bodies aiming to increase tourism.

Love Plus created a dilemma for these government bodies. On one hand, the game was released during a period when local governments were actively being encouraged to incorporate contents tourism into their tourism strategies (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015, pp. 6-7). It had sold over 250,000 copies, an amount vastly higher than other games in its genre (Galbraith, 2011, Bishōjo games section, para. 1; Kimura, 2015, p. 64). And its real-time mechanics had already inspired players to take actions in the real world; after all, one player had staged an elaborate marriage ceremony with one of the characters! However, *Love Plus* was controversial. Dating simulation games in general had long been associated with pornographic content and antisocial behavior (Nozawa, 2013, Dating sims section). This was in large part because many dating simulation games did in fact contain pornographic content and depict antisocial behaviors, but it also reflected the social context these games existed in. Fan communities had, in many cases, half-jokingly accepted societal stigmas, adopting a group image as ugly losers who spent all day in their bedrooms and were incapable of finding romantic partners. *Love Plus*, a video game about dating high school students, fit naturally into this unflattering image.

Despite these misgivings, the game's publisher successfully negotiated a contents tourism partnership with the city of Atami, Japan in 2010 (Okamoto, 2010, p. 1). The game's sequel, *Love Plus+*, would include a sequence set in the city of Atami showing characters visiting

various tourist attractions in real time (Kajita, 2010, paras. 3-4). The real-world city would then invite players to visit, stay in the hotel depicted in the game, follow along with the game's story, and take photos in designated locations (Ogawa, 2011). Spokespeople for the game would ensure the public was aware that "[t]he virtual girls can kiss you as a way of communication, but nothing happens when she sleeps next to you at the hotel", and that they "have no intention of trying to sell a product with pornographic elements" (Ozawa, 2010). Ultimately, the travel partnership proved successful. It increased tourism to Atami and laid the groundwork for future promotional deals between the Japanese government and controversial media franchises (Matsui, 2022, p. 3; Okamoto, 2010, p. 1).

The marriage ceremony had, it seems, contributed to a kind of positive feedback loop. That initial event had certainly been influenced by *Love Plus*'s technology and design, but the game never explicitly told its players to do anything like that. Fans had come up with the idea on their own. Seeing that fans enjoyed this kind of real-world play, the game's developers responded by creating the Atami event. Now, eating a romantic dinner with your Nintendo DS wasn't just a funny Internet joke, it was the way *Love Plus* was meant to be played! They had even enlisted an actual town with actual restaurants to help really drive the point home.

It is worth considering the implications of this shift in more depth. What specific social practice is being encouraged here? When people play *Love Plus* by taking their game console out into the real world, what exactly are they doing? The image of a marriage ceremony between a man and his DS would seem to make the answer clear: they are using technology as a substitute for human relationships. People who play dating simulation games are lonely (Koike et al., 2020). Unable to form a romantic connection in real life, or unwilling to try, they turn to a video game with three smiling faces and thousands of pre-recorded lines of dialogue on the cartridge.

They are encouraged to take the game out in public with them, but this is still a strange and socially isolating thing to do, which feeds the feedback loop further. They may be stuck with *Love Plus* as the only way to fill the emotional void they feel in their lives.

Unfortunately, *Love Plus* (2009) is too limited for that role. Even setting aside the fact that players can never form truly unique or genuine connections with a character who is following a preset script, that script is finite in length. There are only so many things the characters can discuss on their way to school, and once the pool runs out, you start to notice that the game is repeating lines. So long as you keep playing, your relationship with Nene Anegasaki will never end, but it will also never grow, or change, or develop. She will never complete her third year of high school, and you—at least, your virtual representation in the game—will never complete your sophomore year. That cannot be healthy for either of you.

Perhaps it would have been better for *Love Plus* to have an ending. Maybe, after a few months of play, your virtual girlfriend *could* graduate, and she could fondly remember her time with you after she leaves town to attend a prestigious university. Maybe she could choose to end the relationship herself. Maybe she could get abducted by aliens, or eaten by a sea monster, or maybe the game could ask you to imagine the ending that you liked best (Cornell, 2013). Anything seems better than a permanent time loop of stagnant, superficial affection.

But *Love Plus* can't have an ending. The idea of an everlasting romance that continues for months or years of real time is core to the game's identity, and people bought the game because they wanted a companion that they could trust not to abandon them. Thus, we must consider other strategies to address the limitations inherent in *Love Plus*'s technology.

One strategy was available to the game's developers when *Love Plus* was first released: creating sequels. A hypothetical "*Love Plus 2*" could double the amount of prerecorded dialogue

available to players, which would allow them to continue playing for longer without noticing repeats. Subsequent games in the series could also have progressed the characters' ages, creating a sense of growth and change in players' relationships while also making the game somewhat more acceptable for adults to play in public. To enable this, *Love Plus* included an option to transfer save data to another game using the Nintendo DS's wireless technology (Kajita, 2009, para. 175). However, while subsequent *Love Plus* games did include some minor new features, they were all fundamentally remakes of the original with the same characters, setting, and storyline (Famitsu, 2013).

More recent developments in the video game industry are also promising for *Love Plus*. The rising popularity of the Internet has allowed video games to be developed using a "games-as-a-service" model, where new additions to a game are regularly created and released to its players (Dubois & Weststar, 2022, pp. 2333-2335). In a real-time game like *Love Plus*, this could allow developers to add new dialogue at roughly the same speed that players are able to read that dialogue, ensuring that it never runs out. Even more recently, apps like Replika have begun using machine learning technology to generate text that effectively fills in the gaps between different segments of pre-written dialogue (Laestadius et al., 2022, p. 3). This technology allows these apps to serve as more effective companions by customizing the dialogue to fit players' unique situations and preferences.

The usefulness of these strategies ultimately depends on whether one believes it is a good idea to create a video game that acts as a romantic partner for the player. Opinions are likely to differ on this question. People's understanding of *Love Plus*, and of its role in events like the marriage ceremony, can be heavily influenced by many different biases and assumptions, and personal values. One such bias is a set of stereotypes that sociologist Wester Wagenaar (2016)

describes in his essay “Wacky Japan”. English-speaking commentators often mythologize Japan as a nation of advanced futuristic technology (pp. 49-50) or view it through a “wacky” lens that focuses on sexual deviance being supposedly pervasive in its culture (pp. 50-51). As we’ve seen, neither narrative accurately describes *Love Plus*. The game is not some kind of hyper-intelligent AI or high-fidelity augmented reality experience. The game does not reflect some kind of nationwide consensus on acceptable relationships, it caters to a relatively small subculture whose members understand and admit that they are socially abnormal (Nozawa, 2013, Dating sims section). But these biases affect how sources have discussed this game, from researchers incorrectly assuming the game uses advanced sensors that would not have been available on the Nintendo DS (Liberati, 2022, p. 5), to journalists questioning whether players understand that the characters in the game are not real people (Lah, 2009, para. 7).

The players’ own view of *Love Plus* may have been shaped by a different set of biases. As we have previously discussed, one aspect of the of the otaku subculture’s self-image is that its members have failed in some way—that they must isolate themselves because they are incapable of fitting into society and achieving normal social success (Hairston, 2010, p. 321). Like the “wacky Japan” bias, this too is a stereotype, driven in large part by sensational media coverage of extreme incidents and unusual individuals (pp. 312-313). It may also be shaped in part by psychological effects like the network extraversion bias (Feiler & Kleinbaum, 2015). Because extraverted people are more visibly popular and part of more friend groups, it can be easy to assume that everyone is supposed to be extraverted, and this could contribute to communities based around solitary activities like video games feeling like social outcasts. Thus, it is only possible to arrive at a complete understanding of *Love Plus* by studying as many different perspectives on it as possible.

Reflections

I am beginning to suspect that I have become too absorbed in my analysis of *Love Plus*. When one examines a technology and event in the way that I have, through a lens of social science and group psychology, it becomes easy to forget that the people I am studying are real people. As objects of study, the real people described in *CNN* and *Semiotic Review* are flattened into characters in a narrative, their motivations simplified until they start to resemble Anegasaki's game script. I know, intellectually, that these people's lives are real and their pain matters in a way that video game characters do not, but this is not always how I perceive the world emotionally.

Liberati (2022, p. 7) describes a sort of "emergency option" embedded in *Love Plus* that aims to help players who are contemplating suicide. Initially, I had assumed that Liberati had made another mistake in his research and falsely attributed a feature to *Love Plus* that was actually developed later. A more open-ended text-based chatbot, like the "XiaoIce" system Liberati discusses later in his paper, might plausibly need to have a response ready if a user says they are feeling suicidal (McStay, 2022), but it would be strange for *Love Plus* to include such an option in the multiple-choice dialogue of its otherwise pleasant story. Later, however, I discovered an interview with the game's director, Akari Uchida, describing the feature in detail (Kajita, 2010, 本当に疲れ切ったときのための"SOS"ボタン section). It had been introduced in *Love Plus+* as a response to critics suggesting that the game was damaging to mental health: a special one-time-use "SOS button" that would appear if the player spent an excessive amount of time listening to comforting voice lines in the game. When activated, the SOS button would play a special scene where the game character would speak to the player directly, reassuring them that

they are loved and that their life had value. Uchida said in the interview that as he was in the studio listening to the game's voice actors record the lines for this scene, he was brought to tears.

I found myself pondering what it would be like to be in that situation—not for the player, nor for Uchida or the voice actors, but for the game character. You've been told that this person, the player, is feeling as though they are unable to continue with their life. The person has been acting as your boyfriend, but you don't really know all that much about them; *Love Plus*'s dialogue trees do not provide many opportunities to learn what people are like outside the fictional high school students they play as in the game. Still, you feel responsible for their well-being. You cannot call for help or direct them to external resources; the game doesn't have that kind of communication technology. Your only option is to stand there, say the most reassuring things you can think of, and hope something gets through to them. You won't be able to see how they respond.

My empathy for these characters could stem in part from Wagenaar (2016)'s "wacky Japan" biases. Certainly, their situation is strange in a way that is compelling to discuss in an essay. But it may also stem from my own position as a software developer. It is common—perhaps fundamental to the field—for computer programmers to anthropomorphize software (Watt, 1998). We consider what it "knows" and "sees" and "wants to do", as though it has a mind like another person. I spend more time with computers than people, so it is only natural that I might be biased towards empathizing with them more.

I do not feel the need to change how I interact with technology as a result of analyzing this bias. Programmers anthropomorphize their programs because it is a genuinely useful way to think about them! While programs are not alive, they do observe the world, draw conclusions from those observations, and take actions based on those observations. That is how all programs

fundamentally work, from complex robotic systems to high-frequency trading algorithms to Nene Anegasaki keeping her hair long after you tell her it looks good that way. “Empathizing” with the way software “wants” to work—understanding its internal data model and the metaphors it uses to present that data to users—has helped me to learn new tools quickly and diagnose why errors occur.

Still, I might have been able to avoid some of the more unfortunate implications of this analysis by choosing a different lens. Instead of the social science lens, I could have used the humanities lens and examined how *Love Plus* has been reflected in other media. A wide variety of other artists have responded to *Love Plus* in their work, from television plots about becoming dependent on an AI girlfriend (Hirsch et al., 2014) to video games that satirize or deconstruct specific elements of *Love Plus* (Bee, 2013; Cornell, 2013; Salvato, 2017). Japanese fans of *Love Plus* have no doubt created their own artwork and comic books about the game, which could be analyzed to better understand their reactions to it (Lamerichs, 2013, pp. 158-161). In this context, the marriage ceremony could be interpreted as an intentional piece of performance art created as a response to the game. This would create a much stronger divide between its real-life participants, who would act as peers in the ongoing artistic dialogue, and the game, which would remain the object of study. I might even have been inspired to respond artistically to *Love Plus* myself, incorporating literary or narrative elements into my paper to express my opinion on the game through subtext.

But that option is no longer available to me. This paper “isn’t some game where I can reset and try something different” (Salvato, 2017). I have already completed my analysis using the social science lens, and I need to find a way in which this helps me interact with people from different cultures and viewpoints.

…I suppose I did get a bit of practice recognizing katakana. These characters are used in Japanese to spell out foreign loanwords phonetically (Tsuruo & Ishizawa, 2012, p. 2). The game title “ラブプラス”, for example, spells out the English words “love plus”: *ra bu pu ra su* (p. 3). As is the case in many other languages, loanwords in Japanese often take on meanings and usages that differ slightly from how the words are used in their source language. The awkward-sounding phrase “contents tourism” (Graburn & Yamamura, 2020, p. 1) arose because the spelling of the loanword “content”, コンテンツ (*konntenntsu*), ends in the letter ツ (*tsu*), causing Japanese speakers to use the plural form “contents” when writing in English (Underwood, 1999, p. 95). That line about kissing “as a way of communication” (Ozawa, 2010) likely also originates from a katakana loanword. Japanese academic writing sometimes uses the term コミュニケーション (*komyunike-shon)* to describe all forms of interaction between people, including physical interactions like kissing (Ogata & Sugano, 2000; Takahashi et al., 2011). Popular technologies like the Japanese input method built into Microsoft Windows do not draw a distinction between loanwords and other words in Japanese; one simply types in the word’s pronunciation, and the computer substitutes the appropriate characters, regardless of whether they are hiragana, katakana, or kanji, which makes it easy to forget which words come from where.

Understanding this kind of small detail can be surprisingly helpful when interacting with people who speak English as a second language. Before university, I attended a charter high school that took in dozens of international exchange students from countries in Asia in a dubiously legal scheme to obtain more funding (Lawton, 2016). Everyone worked to ensure their new classmates felt welcome, and the international students tried their best to fit in and to practice English—the ostensible purpose of the international student program—but no matter

how much we learned about each other, we were always surprised by the smallest differences between our cultures.

I still keep in touch with one high school friend, Manaka, a student from Japan. She speaks English fluently, but she occasionally uses some of those off-kilter katakana loanword phrases. She also interjects with phrases like “I see”, “uh-huh”, and “really?” a lot while other people are talking. This is apparently quite common for Japanese speakers, who use “backchannel” phrases more than three times as often as native English speakers in casual conversations (Tajima, 2001, pp. 55-56). It can feel kind of strange at first, but it’s easy to get used to. Anyway, lately, I have been telling Manaka about my analysis of *Love Plus* and its role in the wedding ceremony. I don’t usually have very much going on in my life, so finally having some interesting stories to share with her has helped to strengthen our individual conversations. She thought the Atami event was kind of cool, and she enjoyed hearing my efforts to track down those errors in that 2022 journal article by Nicola Liberati. But Manaka sometimes doubts that all these topics we study at school will really end up being useful in the real world.

I decided to reassure her by telling her about…

- …the benefits of examining how technology affects society. *(Turn to page 15.)*
- …how my *Love Plus* analysis impacts my profession. *(Turn to page 17.)*
- …how she could use critical analysis to achieve her goals. *(Turn to page 19.)*

…the benefits of examining how technology impacts society.

"One major benefit of analyzing old technology is that it can help you understand new technology. Just recently, there was this article in *The Cut* written by Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz in 2023," I said, making sure to mention the author's last name and the year of publication, "about women being 'seduced' by a chat-bot app called Replika. Singh-Kurtz talked about how Replika's advanced artificial intelligence technology can create a unique character tailored to each user and suggested that it was concerning that an AI might be able to fill the kind of relationship roles that you'd normally need another person for."

"I see" (M. Takane, personal communication, April 2023).

"It's certainly possible that the new technology helped. But we can see from *Love Plus* that it might not have been the important part. A lot of people had a similar reaction to that game even though it didn't have any AI or character customization at all, just three pre-defined characters with pre-written lines to say. When you look at Replika in that light, you start to think, maybe people are just attracted to the whole idea of a virtual partner they can be in a relationship with on their own terms, regardless of how that virtual partner is actually implemented, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"So analyzing the way *Love Plus* impacted society helped us understand how Replika is impacting society. It can be challenging to dig through archives and journals to find information about these older events—you can't just turn on CNN and hear about them, like you can with things that are happening now—but that process can also help give you a more objective viewpoint. You might be worried about Replika changing the way humans form relationships or destroying the world or something, but you know *Love Plus* didn't, because it came and went a

decade ago and the world's still here. Replika's probably just got a relatively small fan community that likes to make half-joking displays of affection, like *Love Plus*."

"Right."

"Another benefit is that it's just fun to do this stuff, you know? Like, I've had to track down all kinds of crazy sources and read about all these really interesting aspects of this technology. It was amazing when I finally found the one paper in the Elsevier Cinematic Universe that confirms the existence of *Love Plus+*! Being able to call out the mistakes in Liberati's paper was great, too. If nothing else, doing a big research project on an obscure subject can let you feel superior to everyone who doesn't know as about it. Sure, it might be impossible to ever fully free ourselves of our biases and preconceptions about a technology, but even trying at all is better than most people do."

"Huh."

It seemed like I was starting to lose her. This did not come as a surprise; I can sometimes start to ramble when I'm talking about subjects I'm passionate about. (Attentive readers may have noticed that they are currently on page 16 of the ten-page paper I was supposed to write.) To bring the conversation back to something Manaka would be more interested in, I decided to ask her…

- …if she'd seen anything neat lately. *(Turn to page 21.)*
- …how her day was going. *(Turn to page 22.)*
- …if she had plans this weekend. *(Turn to page 23.)*

…how my *Love Plus* analysis impacts my profession.

"So, I know the field of human-computer interaction can have kind of a bad reputation for psychologically manipulating and objectifying people, as described in a 2020 paper by Narayanan et al", I began. I always like to identify my sources in case Manaka wants to look them up in the reference list. "But it's not so bad. Really, it's just about designing computer programs that people can feel good about using."

"I see" (M. Takane, personal communication, April 2023).

"Most of the time, HCI people think that everything has to be magic. We've put tons and tons of work into creating systems to try and guess what people want automatically, without them telling us. Like the YouTube recommendation algorithm, which Covington et al. wrote about in 2016. You don't set preferences, you don't even need to like or dislike videos, it just tries to figure out what you want based on what you watch."

"Uh-huh."

"But *Love Plus* is actually a really interesting counterexample to this philosophy! As a game, it's *super* transparent about how all its systems work. You can see all your character's stats right on the screen, and there's little icons for your girlfriend's mood variables, and you're supposed to pick choices to move those stats and variables in the direction you want. Half the time the game straight-up asks you what you'd like individual aspects of your girlfriend's appearance and personality to be. Mechanically, it's, like, the furthest thing from 'magic' imaginable."

"Right."

"And people fell in love with it anyway! Maybe not literally, but the game's fiction was compelling even when players knew exactly how the game worked. It sold a bunch of copies,

and it made a whole bunch of people happy. One guy liked it enough to marry it! So you start to think, maybe we can incorporate that kind of design into other areas of computer software. Systems that people can get invested in, even if they see all the inner workings. Maybe *because* they see all the inner workings."

"Huh."

It sounded like Manaka was starting to understand the value of critical analysis, but I didn't want to take up all the air in the room. Conversations are two-way streets, after all! I moved on and asked her…

- …if she'd seen anything neat lately. *(Turn to page 21.)*
- …how her day was going. *(Turn to page 22.)*
- …if she had plans this weekend. *(Turn to page 23.)*

…how she could use critical analysis to achieve her goals.

"If you really look at the way technology is impacting your life, you can then change how you're using technology to make your life better. For example, a lot of people decide to stop using social media entirely to improve their self-esteem, like Pennington wrote about in 2021," I said, seamlessly inserting an APA-style narrative in-text citation into the conversation.

"I see" (M. Takane, personal communication, April 2023).

"Maybe you start by looking at some event that occurred recently in your own life, and thinking about how felt about it and how technology was involved. Or maybe you look at aggregated metrics—a lot of phones these days have 'digital wellness' screens that tell you how much time you spent on Twitter—and try to work out what causes that usage or what effects it has on you."

"Uh-huh."

"You can also look at the way technology shapes how you communicate. There are a lot of ways that products can kind of nudge you towards talking in a certain way, from implicit things like when people used abbreviations a lot because old cell phones were cumbersome to type on, to explicit features like the Microsoft Word 'Editor' assistant that warns me whenever I write the word 'actually', to entire platforms like Instagram or TikTok encouraging people to express all of their thoughts as pictures or videos. It can be worth looking at specific messages or posts you've made and asking yourself whether that's really your own voice. Whether technology is helping you express yourself or *changing* how you express yourself."

"Right."

"And the answer to questions like those doesn't have to be quitting technology entirely. Once you've got a good understanding of how a particular technology affects you, and how it

impacts your society, you might conclude that it's actually a good thing after all. Maybe the 'Editor' really is helping me write better. You can also use that understanding to achieve more specific goals in your life. Like, maybe you say, well, I know the girl in this video game isn't real, and I am not forming an actual relationship with her, but she helps me feel a little less lonely, and that's really all I'm looking for right now. And you can pick up the game and play it, and you'll be fine with that."

"Huh."

Come to think of it, I wasn't sure Manaka really used any of the technologies I was talking about. She had an old cell phone that she used for text messages and e-mail (which she just calls "mail", via the katakana loanword メイル "*meiru*"), but I didn't think she was into video games or social media or anything. I decided to change the subject and ask her…

- …if she'd seen anything neat lately. *(Turn to page 21.)*
- …how her day was going. *(Turn to page 22.)*
- …if she had plans this weekend. *(Turn to page 23.)*

…if she'd seen anything neat lately.

"Oh, do you remember when we were on our way to the mall and we saw that new store they were building?" Manaka replied. "Turns out it's a karaoke parlor, and it just opened the other day! It looked really nice, and there's a special discount for students, they had a big sign and everything. Fifty percent off! I was thinking… maybe we could go check it out this weekend?"

Karaoke did sound fun, and it would be nice to relax a bit after finishing my big paper. Then again, I had already been eating out a lot lately, so I wasn't sure my wallet could handle the additional expense. I decided to tell her…

- "Sure, what time?" *(Turn to page 24.)*
- "Only if you're paying!" *(Turn to page 25.)*

…how her day was going.

"It's been great! Every day I get to chat with you is a pretty good day. Carter. And the weather has been nice, too. This spring air is so refreshing!"

- I asked her if she'd seen anything neat lately. *(Turn to page 21.)*
- I asked her if she had plans this weekend. *(Turn to page 23.)*

…if she had plans this weekend.

"Oh, do you remember when we were on our way to the mall and we saw that new store they were building?" Manaka asked. "Turns out it's a karaoke parlor, and it just opened the other day! It looked really nice, and there's a special discount for students, they had a big sign and everything. Fifty percent off! I was thinking… maybe we could go check it out this weekend?"

I've never liked singing all that much—I always end up with a sore throat—but Manaka seemed to enjoy it the last time we went to karaoke together. I decided to tell her…

- "Sure, what time?" *(Turn to page 24.)*
- "I dunno, I'd rather go bowling." *(Turn to page 26.)*

“Sure, what time?”

“How about 10:30 AM on Saturday?” Manaka asked. She always liked to visit places at weird off-peak hours, but I didn’t mind. It was better than waiting in line.

“Sounds good to me,” I said…

- “I’ll see you then!” *(Turn to page 27.)*

“Only if you’re paying!”

Manaka laughed. “Alright, just this once. Cheapskate!”

“Hey, college is expensive! Even when it’s a dubious online college. Anyway,” I continued…

- “I’ll see you then!” *(Turn to page 27.)*

“I dunno, I’d rather go bowling.”

“Oh, okay! Bowling sounds good too. We haven’t bowled in a while, have we? I wonder if I’ll still remember how… What time do you want to go?”

“7 PM on Sunday?”

“Alright.”

- “I’ll see you then!” *(Turn to page 27.)*

“I’ll see you then!”

“Great,” Manaka said, “I’m looking forward to it already.”

“…”

“…Come and talk to me again soon. Carter. Okay?”

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