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## Lost in communication: The relationship between hikikomori and virtual reality in Japanese anime

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**Abstract.** Nowadays virtual reality has gained extreme popularity among adolescents around the world, thanks to the possibility they offer to create a new life for their users. Especially for teenagers affected by the hikikomori syndrome, who experience struggles in establishing communication with others, virtual reality has become a tool to forsake their “adverse” reality, shaping fictitious safe environments and creating relationships with similar-minded users. This issue of virtual reality has been depicted in recent Japanese animation, whose country is mostly affected by this issue. I will show mainly two approaches to the phenomenon: the one given in the anime series *Sword Art Online* (2012), in which virtual reality is perceived as the only place where true communication can happen; the second is the interpretation given by director Hosoda Mamoru in his animated features *Summer Wars* (2009) and *Belle* (2021), where virtual reality is a tool to support real life’s difficulties.

**Keywords:** Virtual reality, Hikikomori, anime, communication, Mamoru Hosoda.

What does it mean to be lonely? When relationships start becoming meaningful and allow real communication and self-growth between its users?

In an epoque where an hyperconnected world requires people to enlarge their network of relationships and affections, the alienating way of life of the working metropolis paradoxically exasperates the feeling of loneliness. This twisted turn of the events has been caught in the narrative of contemporary anime, a medium that has always been very receptive to voice out the issues and discomfort of the Japanese people. The rise of the hikikomori syndrome, the rising of tax suicide among the young generations and a rejection of society are the results of this relentless social pressure. Therefore, to survive this kind of reality that demands to almost obliterate one’s inner struggles to better homologate in what is deemed to be a “proper life”, many people turned to virtual reality and gaming as coping

method (often choosing to get lost in them, forgetting the outer world), a dynamic that has been identified by Japanese animators as the *zeitgeist* of their time. Serving as an outlet from the daily-life stress and as a world to escape to when one feels overwhelmed, many anime protagonists turn to virtual safe havens to escape the public eye. In the first season of anime series *Sword Art Online*, by Itō Tomohiko (2012), the 15 years-old hikikomori protagonist Kirito comes to elect the virtual reality of the homonymous game as his “real” home; in the animated features by Hosoda Mamoru *Summers Wars* (2009) and *Belle* (2021), their young characters Kenji, Kazuma and Suzu are first introduced as their virtual avatars, and not as themselves, to symbolize how these teenagers feel free to express their true self only on the internet.

In this paper my intention is to highlight how the hikikomori phenomenon, the result of this escape of reality and difficulty in communication, is depicted in contemporary Japanese anime. I will show how it relates with the dimensions of virtual reality, illustrating the roles that this immaterial dimension plays in different anime and the different effects it has on the “real” life of the protagonists.

## 1. THE LOST GENERATION: THE HIKIKOMORI PHENOMENON

After the economic crisis of the Nineties, the Japanese government faced the challenge to reinvent the system of the Country to overcome the economic stagnation that put them on their knees. The response to this crisis was a revolution inside the structure of Japanese corporations – giving up the lifetime employment system while proceeding to a drastic cut on benefits, and the adoption of temporary workers as main workforce (Ozawa-De Silva [2021]: 54) – and the cultural campaign “Cool Japan” to expand the influence of Japanese soft power globally, relying especially on the anime industry (Yunuen, Mandujano [2016]: 78-81).

Twenty years later, the results of these efforts paid off: Japan is now the third economic glob-

al power in the world<sup>1</sup> and its anime market has been in constant growth for ten years straight up to the coronavirus crisis<sup>2</sup> (and it’s already regaining its previous numbers).

This recovery was an extraordinary feat accomplished by the Japanese system but, as a consequence of such an extreme pressure on its workforce, it gravely exacerbated some already existent problems that are becoming a major issue in society, such as urban alienation, the *hikikomori* phenomenon and, in the extreme, suicide (Ozawa-De Silva [2021]: 57). Anno Hideaki, in his masterpiece *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), had already reflected how the loss of identity, the economic crisis and distrust in politics had already affected the younger generation, and soon after that the issue of hikikomori became apparent for the first time. This problem now has become more and more compelling to our society, and many intellectuals started researching the causes that put such a strain on their youth (Plata [2014]: 4-5).

In 1998 Japanese psychiatrist Saito Tamaki published his research on “people who withdraw from society”, the hikikomori. It sparked a lively debate in the International scientific community, bringing to light a problem that was widespread, but still didn’t have a name of its own. By his definition, Saito described this phenomenon as the following:

A state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal cause. (Saito [2013]: 25)

The main feature Saito identified regarding this extreme retire from society was a difficulty to have functioning relationships and communication with others and, in response to that, the tendency for self-preservation by withdrawing socially. This is typical of the adolescent mind-set.

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, GDP Japan (Ed.), World Bank, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZSUWjB>.

<sup>2</sup> The Association of Japanese Animations [2022]: 2.

Despite common beliefs, the adolescent mindset today continues until the late twenties, with a large number of adolescents not realizing adulthood until thirty (Saito [2013]: 25).

Exactly during this delicate time of personal growth, where the identity of the single is carefully built and they try to build their path to the future they envision, a sequence of emotional or independence related setbacks (failing one's academic studies, not being able to sustain yourself) can easily trigger the desire to withdraw from society. The hikikomori see as an unbearable task exposing himself to others to ask for help because of the feelings of self-hatred and shame. Afraid of further rejection, they stop having interpersonal relationships, even with their family, shutting off every communication and retiring in their rooms to create a safe environment (Saito [2013]: 85-86).

Recent studies have proved that, by 2020, 1.2% of young Japanese adults had become hikikomori (Hamanasaki et al. [2020]: 808-809), generally male, with interpersonal relationship issues, close dependency to the Internet, and a high risk of suicide (Yong, Nomura [2019]: 1). Moreover, if this phenomenon initially was deemed to be topical and developable only in Japan, subsequent studies have noticed how a hikikomori presence could be found, even if in lesser numbers than in Asia, in Western countries such as the Usa, Australia, Spain, Brazil and France (Yong, Nomura [2019]: 1). Italy in particular covers a special role in the active response to the issue, being the first European country to start treating this condition as a social issue and providing psychological aid to the Italian hikikomori (Saito [2013]: 6). Owing to this attention, several studies have assessed how many Italian adolescents, in particular students, are at risk (or already are) of becoming hikikomori, and that this situation necessitates immediate assistance and support. A national study carried out by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche in Pisa Institute of Clinical Physiology reported that, among students aged 15 to 19, 2.1% (54,000 students) identify as hikikomori, 1.7% are actual hikikomori (44,000 students), and 2.6% (67,000 students) are at high risk of becoming one (Gros-

so, Cerrai [2023]: 4). Another relevant element that has emerged from these studies is the close association of the hikikomori with a problematic use of the Internet, where the overuse of virtual technology may be viewed by the hikikomori as an effective surrogate to "real" human communication, alienating them from actual reality (Amen-dola et al. [2021]: 107). While this position still meets contrasting opinion in the scientific community (Hamanasaki et al. [2020]: 813), it is an undeniable fact how people suffering from this hikikomori syndrome perceive the virtual world of the internet and the endless possibilities it offers as a safe haven from a reality they have chosen to reject.

In the next section, I'm going to illustrate how Japanese anime, a medium that always took interest in the issue of its own society, portrayed this phenomenon in its production, displaying several points of view and outcome of this dependance of virtual realities in the everyday life of people who struggle to fit in society and full-fledged hikikomori.

### 2.1. A PLACE WHERE TO BECOME YOUR "TRUE SELF": SWORD ART ONLINE VIRTUAL REALITY AND ESCAPISM

As discussed above, when a person withdraws from society, they tend to create a safe, closed environment under their control. During the '90s and early 2000s, when the use of the internet was still limited, this action translated mainly in self-isolation and the occasional virtual interaction via blogs and forum. Nowadays, in the age of social media and augmented reality, this has drastically evolved into the idea of retreat into the virtual world to live through alter ego customized according to their desire, or to lose themselves in exciting virtual games to escape the traumas of societal pressure (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 7-9). The virtual space is therefore seen as a "pure land" where everyone has a chance to start anew and reinvent themselves, designing the kind of life they wished to have in the real world and achiev-

ing their dreams. In an interesting paper written by Ekaterina Kormilitsyna, this theme has been thoroughly analysed, and *Sword Art Online* and *Summer Wars* are again taken as example. The *fil rouge* between these two animated productions (that is then reprised also in the later production of *Belle*) is a common narration that see at its centre the co-existence of the real world with a virtual one, which deeply affects the daily life of the people. Yet, despite the seemingly similar setting, the nature by which these two digital realities are intended greatly differ one from the other, and the impact they have on the life of their protagonists lead them to opposite destinies.

In the first season of *Sword Art Online* (commonly referred to as SAO) Itō sets the story in the virtual reality of the homonymous VRMMORPG<sup>3</sup> game. This platform, thanks to the cerebral helmet NerveGear, allows the users to use their own five senses and to control their virtual body with the mind to live adventures in a fantastical world. Yet, this promised land turns out to be a deadly trap, since its creator Kayaba Akihiko removed any possibility of log out from the game to players and projected the systems in a way that, if someone tried to be forcibly logged out from the helmet or died during the game, his real-life body would die too. Kazuto Kirigaya, known as his gaming avatar's name "Kirito", is a 15 years old hikikomori with a talent for technology, and was one of the beta testers who helped develop the game before its commercial debut. Disheartened by the coldness of his adoptive family (his parents died in an accident and he was taken in by his aunt and uncle) and unable to form new bonds, he rejects the world around him and finds refuge in the charming world of SAO.

What results surprising in the concept of this series is the fact that, setting aside the elementary goal of the protagonists to return to the physical world as to save themselves, many of the people trapped in SAO start thriving in it and to feel more alive than they did in the real world. As by Kirito's affirmation in the first episode, «in this

virtual world, a single blade can take you wherever you want. It is a virtual world, but I still feel more alive here than I do in the real one»<sup>4</sup>. Feeling free to express his own feelings and full potential, a possibility he felt negated to him in his ordinary life oppressed by society (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 9-10), Kirito discloses little by little his true personality, and starts forming relationships with people, a thing he avoided in the real world. This dynamic is not unique to him, and even other characters witness this change in them, making them wonder if it will be worth the effort to go back to their normal life, once they go back to physical reality<sup>5</sup>. As the story progresses, Kirito develops feelings for his partner Asuna, and they decide to marry in the in-game world: by taking this action, they acknowledge that the time and the feelings they are having in the virtual world are real, and that the virtual world of SAO has become their safe home, to the point that Kirito asks Asuna to renounce clearing the game (thus renouncing to go back to reality), when they have to face a deathly mission<sup>6</sup>.

Throughout the series, many times shots of the real life world (like Kirito's house and room) are sided right before the SAO sequences, making evident with the difference of meaning they both carry: giving grayish, gloomy palette to the real settings in the world (except to Asuna's hospital room) while conferring brighter tones and an endless variety of colours to the world of SAO, it is apparent how Itō himself wants to convey the message that the place where the protagonist Kirito has more chances to be happy and form meaningful, true human communication is the virtual world. In the end, the virtual world of SAO ends up being conceived as a substitute for the life in the physical world.

<sup>4</sup> Itō [2012]: *Episode 1 - The world of Swords*, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures, 6.42-7.00.

<sup>5</sup> Itō [2012]: *Episode 6, Illusionary Avenger*, 18.32-19-10; *Episode 13, Edge of Hell's Abyss*, 9.46- 12.30, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures.

<sup>6</sup> Itō [2012]: *Episode 13, Edge of Hell's Abyss*, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures 14.15-15.20.

<sup>3</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.



## 2.2. THE TRUE POWER OF CONNECTION: THE WORTH OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN HOSODA MAMORU'S WORKS

Seemingly beginning from the same point of *SAO*, an evasion from reality, the virtual worlds created in Hosoda Mamoru's narrations are meant to lead their protagonists into a completely different path from the ones' of Itō. Hosoda was one of the first Japanese directors to actively use the digitalized realities as key elements in his works: starting from his first works in the *Digimon* franchise<sup>7</sup> (1999-2000) he knew that the relation with the internet and virtual reality would have been a challenge for the new generations, with its possibilities and dangers (Solomon [2022]: 236). Yet, he never surrendered to a pessimistic view in which the only way humanity can feel free and accomplished is through a surrogate virtual life. Instead, he always viewed the digital world as a means of support to our daily life, designed to inspire us to become our best self and to be able to fully embrace our real dimension.

Both at the beginning *Summer Wars* and *Belle*, the narration starts with the voice of OZ and U, the meta-verses of the two movies, which present themselves and their essence to the viewers.

### *Summer Wars* – 2009

Welcome to the world of OZ. OZ is a virtual world on the Internet that brings the people of the world together so they can enjoy themselves. You can easily access the world of OZ through your personal computer, cell phone, or television. [...] First, select your avatar. An avatar is your representative in the world of OZ. You can design however you want regarding clothes, hairstyle, tail, etc. [...] Your personal data is protected by OZ's impenetrable security system. Just relax and enjoy your time in this world. In the shopping mall, you can find music, movies, furniture, commodities, automobiles, real estate, vacation plans, and many other things from around the globe, as genuine as reality. [...] But

above all, what is necessary is communication. In OZ, all languages are instantly translated, enabling you to communicate with everyone in the world with ease. There are currently four million communities in the OZ community. [...] The world of OZ has a full range of support and services for business as well. [...] There are also many local governments and self-governing bodies represented in OZ. You can do your taxes or take care of any official business here in OZ. [...]. With open arms, we welcome you to the world of OZ<sup>8</sup>.

The world of OZ seems to perfectly embody a system where a clear-cut distinction from human to the technological world was no longer possible (Taylor [2008]: 3-6). Using a marketing-pleasing virtual platform, Hosoda designs a virtual reality that reunite in itself platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Google and Amazon, visually captivating and with pop atmospheres (Solomon [2022]: 55). Yet, in contrast with *SAO*, the attractiveness of OZ doesn't outshine the beauty of the physical world. Set in the countryside of the prefecture of Nagano, the protagonists live their virtual adventure in a traditional Japanese mansion, surrounded by vintage furniture and rusted samurai armours. Despite being ancient and outdated, the warm atmosphere of this family house, the disparate objects that witness myriads of heartfelt memories and the never-ending charm of Japanese heritage make the real world presented by Hosoda as desirable as the upbeat OZ world, and worth fighting for to live in it.

Yet, the focus the Japanese director chooses to emphasise is not the wonder of such potentiality, but the danger it carries within itself and the irreplaceable worth of human connection (Condry [2013]: 36). When a rogue artificial intelligence called Love Machine attacks OZ, its actions on the Web affects the real world and he even causes the death of Jinnouchi Sakae, the grandmother of the female protagonist (Solomon [2022]: 65).

Helped by the whole Jinnouchi family (27 members) it will be up to the three teenagers Kenji, Natsuki and Kazuma to save the world. Focusing on Kenji and Kazuma, these two boys not only

<sup>7</sup> IMDb (ed. by), *Mamoru Hosoda*, IMDb, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023, <https://imdb.to/3JM6UGs>.

<sup>8</sup> Hosoda [2009]: 0:59- 3:34.

are not the so-called archetypal heroes, but could be even considered outcasts of society. If the first boy is presented as a math wizard who chose to spend all of his free time working in the virtual world, Kazuma became a champion gamer after the ordeal of being a hikikomori, being bullied at school. Both of them choose to retire in the virtual world to seek a safe place where to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation with society, but what propels true change in Kenji and Kazuma is the vicinity of their beloved ones and the dialogue with them.

### *Belle – 2021*

“U” is the ultimate virtual community, created and governate by his five, wise architects, known as the Voices. With over five billion registered users, it is the biggest internet society in history, and it is still growing. Launching the U app you employ the latest body-sharing technology, which allows the users to come together, relax, or just have fun. Your avatar in U is called an “AS” and it is automatically generated based on your personal biometrical information. U is another reality, and AS is another you. You may not be able to start over in the real world, but you can start over in the world of U<sup>9</sup>.

Twelve years after *Summer Wars*, Hosoda reprises the theme of virtual reality in his feature animation *Belle*, a modern adaptation of the classic *The Beauty and the Beast*, presenting it to Cannes in 2021 and receiving a 14-minutes standing ovation<sup>10</sup>. As it is clearly seen from the above introduction, over the years Hosoda has witnessed how evolution of social media has moulded the world around him, and how the many virtual communities, like our Instagram, Tik Tok or Facebook have translated into the ultimate outlet and haven for our youth’s discomfort (even if many of the internet perils are displayed throughout the movie) (Solomon [2022]: 236).

<sup>9</sup> M. Hosoda [2021]: 0:24-3:02

<sup>10</sup> Steen, E., Japanese anime *Belle* receives a 14-minute standing ovation at Cannes, *Times Out*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZXBToe>.

After the tragic death of her mother, the shy provincial teen Suzu can’t seem to be able to escape grieving for her, and over the years she shuts away her father and friends, spending her time in loneliness, if not for her pushy friend Hiro. Only when she joins the U community, thanks to the anonymity of the alter ego she adopts (the superstar singer Belle) Suzu is able to unleash her astonishing talent and embracing the passion she had locked away since her mother’s death<sup>11</sup>.

In the real world Suzu is struggling with her feelings, unable to process and understand them. Yet, when she starts living through the persona of Belle, she experiences a kind of freedom she had never felt as Suzu (Solomon [2022]: 223). The Japanese teen feels free in this reinvented version of herself, and only as Belle she’s able to temporarily drop the emotional chains that constrict her, pouring out her true feelings in the texts of her songs. In an interview for BBC Culture Hosoda confirms Suzu’s feelings:

I think the fact that there is this other world where we can be another version of ourselves [helps to show] that we are not just what we show to society [...] Belle and Suzu are so different that they’re virtually different people, but they’re actually the same person. Sometimes we end up believing that we are only that one side of ourselves, but we actually have many dimensions. And learning that and believing that helps us to be more free<sup>12</sup>.

In this feature film, differently from *Summer Wars*, it is evident how Suzu doesn’t feel at ease with herself in the real world, but she never totally rejects her real-life identity in favour of the virtual one. Although Suzu is reluctant in accepting her avatar in U, which doesn’t reflect at all her physical characteristics, she ends up accepting it because it displays freckles on its face, a fea-

<sup>11</sup> Lyons, A., *Mamoru Hosoda’s Beauty and the Beast riff Belle argues for optimism about the internet*, Polygon, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3JqqFTE>.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, K., *The film changing how we see the internet*, BBC Culture, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023, <https://bbc.in/3ZTLcW7>.

ture she's ashamed of in real life but that in U is a sign of her true identity. Moreover, right until before the end of the movie, is always her alter ego in the U world, Belle, who brings forwards the dramatic action, while Suzu is paralyzed by her inner wounds: all of Belle's outfits are extravagant and glamorous, and she is visually perceived as the rightful protagonist of the story. Yet, when she gets to know in U the Dragon (Kei's avatar, a boy victim of abuse), and their relationship progressively affects her, Belle's outfits become more and more modest, anticipating a switch of protagonist-ship to Suzu. In fact, the events Suzu experience as Belle changes her also in real life, helping her face her trauma and acknowledge her worth in her normal self.

### 3. THE FULFILLMENT OF THE SELF: THE ROLE OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION IN THE DISCOVERY OF TRUE IDENTITY

Starting from the interior sorrow of the individual affected by the hikikomori syndrome, passing to the desire of true interaction and self-recognition of Kirito in *SAO* and the need to understand one's own feelings in the works by Hosoda, all these people reveal through their life stories their intimate need of real communication with the ones they hold dear. Every one of them, oppressed by society or trauma, throughout their stories are desperately trying to find a safe place to interact with others where they can feel free to express their true self. The hikikomori and Kirito and Asuna from *SAO* experience too this overwhelming need, and in front of the stark obstacles and even rejects of real life, they can't help but to give up that side of reality to shield their psyche in a reality that can nurture them. In *SAO* Asuna and Kirito, while battling their way in the game to win their freedom from Kayabata, build their own home, starting their own family and even adopt the virtual AI Yui as their own daughter. This choice of leading a normal life in the augmented world, even after they break free from it, implies the choice of the protagonists to recognize that virtual real-

ity as their "true" place of belonging. Virtual reality becomes «a stable environment removed from the real world, and the technological universe has potential to become a true home» (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 16). Yet, this doesn't mean that any possibility of regaining the bonds of the physical world is abandoned by the protagonists, even though the pessimistic view of the director Itō makes it seemingly impossible to recover real human communication in the real world. In the second season of *SAO* Asuna tries in fact to mend the relationship with her mother, but it is only when she invites her in her virtual home that the distance between them is closed and interaction becomes possible<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the apparent victory for their new found identity of the protagonists of *SAO*, their liberation and emancipation from the harshness of reality is achieved through the rejection of it and a self-imposed recognition of their value. Missing out on the confrontation and the dialogue with outer reality and the people connected to it, the hikikomori of *SAO* (Kirito) and the hikikomori in real life miss their chance for real growth, cutting out every possibility of communication and further discovery of their worth.

In the movie of *Summer Wars*, the character who more faces this transition is Kazuma, the cousin of the female lead Natsuki. Bullied at school, he retreated into a hikikomori state and lived for a period only of online games. Yet, thanks to the relationship with his grandfather, he opened up to him and started learning martial arts from him. Because of this, he managed to face the bullies in real life and, in the virtual one, he became King Kazuma, the champion avatar fighter of the world of OZ. By choosing to rely on another person, and starting a dialogue with him about his weakness and fears, Kazuma fulfills the potentialities hidden in himself, not by renouncing his qualities in the virtual world, but by letting them strengthen his real-life self.

In a similar way, in the film *Belle* the protagonist Suzu is able to overcome her trauma only

<sup>13</sup> Itō [2014]: *Episode 23, Beginning of a Dream, Sword Art Online II*, A-1 Pictures, 16.15-21.09.

when she reveals her true identity, destroying her virtual persona on U. When she discovers that behind the avatar of the Dragon hides Kei, a teen victim of abuse, she tries desperately to contact him in real life to help him, yet the boy pushes her away. Accusing her of being another hypocrite who will later abandon them after having showed their good deed to the world, he cuts her off. In the end, the only way Suzu will be able to reach out to Kei will be exposing her true self to the virtual world, finally winning his trust and thus enabling real communication. In the end, Suzu is able to put past herself her trauma and she finally re-owns her talent for singing and her relationships, including the potential love story with her crush Shinobu.

This was the message Hosoda meant for his movies, wanting to convey that “connection itself is our weapon”, and that’s why in his works he always takes the pains to create as many characters as detailed as possible (just in *Summer Wars* there are more than 30), in order to show the powerful deeds they could achieve together just thanks to their human interaction and collective effort (Condry [2013]: 36).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The presence of the augmented reality of the internet and virtual reality is an undeniable fact, and it won’t be long before it will become inextricable from our physical reality. Yet, as we progress towards this future, we must better understand that the infinite possibilities allowed us by the virtual reality are not meant to be seen as another dimension where to flee, but as a stepping stone to wholly fulfil ourselves in our everyday life. As Saito Tamaki remarks in his study, the only thing that will change our state of withdrawal and win our loneliness is to keep trying to communicate with our dearest ones and the world surrounding us (Saito [2013]: XII). The people affected by the hikikomori syndrome and Kirito and Asuna are also aware of this burning need for human contact, but because they have become so

powerless in a world they think rejected them, they chose to live a reality of their design. This choice doesn’t prevent them from having meaningful relationships of course, since it’s also possible to find true friendship via virtual communication (as happened to Kirito with Asuna), but by eliminating all their undesirable features and choosing to listening only to their voice (eliminating uncomfortable opinions), these people refuse an honest confrontation with themselves that, if done earnestly, would allow them to perceive their limits and overcome them. The characters from *Summer Wars* and *Belle* are obliged to face in the virtual world the limits they tried to escape to in the physical one and, supported by familiar and even unexpected people, they end up embracing their identity as a whole, managing to have a new start in real life.

When facing difficult times, it can be natural to retreat into a safe haven where to recover from our wounds of the psyche, and it can be therapeutic to do so for a moderate amount of time. The virtual reality has been conceived for this purpose, and there is nothing wrong with losing ourselves in the pleasure of fictional adventures. Yet, this retreat into a digital inner world must not make us lose hope in the outer world, and that even when things seem hopeless in life, keeping up the communication with the people around us can lead the way to find again your true self.

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