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Bishōjo Games: 'Techno-Intimacy' and the Virtually Human in Japan

by Patrick W. Galbraith

Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth analysis of *bishōjo* games for the personal computer, which run the gamut from conversation to pornography, and comprise a huge industry in Japan that blurs the line between direct, mediated and purely machine contact. These games and their so-called otaku players provide an opportunity to think critically about human being with technology. To this end, the paper introduces Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and interpretations of it by Thomas LaMarre, who argues that the imaginary girl or *shōjo* is "a new god" capable of grounding a free relation to technology. This theory is applied to a close examination of *bishōjo* games, with a focus on how gender and identity come into play. The paper concludes with a discussion of *LovePlus,* a *bishōjo* game for portable devices, which offers open-ended interactions with a virtual girl. These interactions are also with the machine, contributing to the formation of "techno-intimacy" (Allison 2006) and opening up possibilities of "becoming" with a technological "companion species" (Haraway 2003).

Keywords: Bishōjo games, dating simulator games, technology, Martin Heidegger, shōjo, Japan, popular culture.

> "As machines become embedded ever more deeply into life and even flesh, the line between human and nonhuman increasingly blurs. So does that between material reality and the image making we rely upon to see, know, and interact with our world(s)."
> - Anne Allison[1]

Introduction

Since the turn of the new millennium, fears have intensified that humanity will be lost to the onslaught of technology. Even Sherry Turkle, long known for her more hopeful outlook, has recently started to wonder if technology might be alienating humans from one another (Turkle 2011). Perhaps no other place is as tied to the global imagination of technological dystopia as Japan, and perhaps no persona as much as *"otaku."* Though roughly comparable to cult fans, Japanese otaku are described as "children of media and technology" (Grassmuck 1990: 5), "socially inept but often brilliant technological shut-ins" (Greenfeld 1993: 1) or "pathological-techno-fetishist[s]" (Gibson 1996: 88). In their world, "Technology is your companion. Technology is your teacher. Technology is your friend. Technology is your livelihood. Ultimately, technology becomes your reality" (Greenfeld 1994: 274). The overarching theme is that *otaku* are "posthuman," more comfortable with machines than people, confused about the difference between the real and the virtual. This was clear in the international media frenzy surrounding one Japanese man's public "marriage" to a videogame character in December 2009.[2] However, the basic idea that "humanity" and "technology" are in opposition needs to be problematized. Tom Boellstorff, who conducted ethnography in the online world of Second Life, argues:

> "It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human 'nature' to experience life through the prism of

> culture, human being has always been virtual being. … In virtual worlds we can be virtually human, because in them humans, through *techne,* open up a gap from the actual and discover new possibilities for human being" (Boellstorff 2008: 5, 238).

To further develop Boellstorff's insight, this paper takes up the example of *bishōjo* games for the personal computer, which run the gamut from conversation to pornography, and comprise a huge industry in Japan that blurs the line between direct, mediated and purely machine contact. These games and their so-called *otaku* players provide an opportunity to think critically about human being with technology. The paper begins by describing the place of media and technology in Japan, with special attention given to the condensed and accelerated situation in Tokyo. It next introduces Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and interpretations of it by Thomas LaMarre, who argues that the imaginary girl *(shōjo)* is "a new god" capable of grounding a free relation to technology (LaMarre 2009: 84-85). With this theory in mind, the paper conducts a close examination of *bishōjo* games, emphasizing how gender and identity come into play. The paper concludes with a discussion of *LovePlus,* a *bishōjo* game for portable devices, which offers open-ended interactions with a virtual girl. These interactions are also with the machine, contributing to the formation of "techno-intimacy" (Allison 2006) and opening up possibilities of "becoming" with a technological "companion species" (Haraway 2003).

Media and technology in Japan

In Japan, producers and distributors of media are disproportionately centered in Tokyo.[3] A unique ecology has emerged in the last half century. By the 1970s, the tumultuous years of military occupation, economic recovery and social upheaval in Japan were over, and consumerism was on the rise (Murakami 2005: 119, 192). This engendered a turning point so drastic that Yoshimi Shun'ya argues it was the beginning of "post-postwar society" (Yoshimi 2009). Tokyo was one of the most capital-saturated urban centers in the world, and an unprecedented amount was invested in advertising, packaging, design and image production (Yoshimi 2009: 56). The city became an endless space of advertisements, screens and seductive images (Kitada 2002). For Volker Grassmuck, Tokyo is a city where "everything is sign, everything is surface and interface" (Grassmuck 1990: 6). Personal and portable technology to access media flows is such a pervasive presence in the lives of contemporary Japanese that it is described as "pedestrian" (Ito et al 2005).[4] Indeed, few nations are as generally enthusiastic about technology.[5] Under government slogans such as "living together with robots" *(robotto tono kyōsei),* industry, universities and private groups and individuals are developing service and companion machines and integrating them into everyday life. Katsuno Hirofumi explains that this is a scene where affective investments and narratives of intimacy are reproduced in mechanical others (Katsuno, forthcoming).

Given that intimate interactions with media and technology are a widespread (and global) phenomenon, *otaku* might be described as those most actively and intimately engaging with media and technology. By Grassmuck's estimation, *otaku* are "media cyborgs" born from the "electronic womb" of Japan (Grassmuck 1990: 6). The imagery here seems to invite an application of Donna Haraway's writings on "techno-feminism," specifically the cyborg as a "queer" life form that blurs boundaries (Haraway 2003, discussed below). There is something to this unexpected alignment of women and *otaku.* Indeed, as often as they are associated with technology, *otaku* are associated with images of the young girls they produce and consume. Ōtsuka Eiji argues that as Japan became affluent in the 1970s, the young girl, or *shōjo,* came to symbolize in the media consumptive pleasure suspended from (re)productive functions (Ōtsuka 1989: 18, 20). Those identified as *otaku* were none other than the boys and men oriented towards *"shōjo"* consumer culture. This transgression of masculinity and productivity accounts to some extent for the "moral panic" surrounding *otaku* culture in Japan in the 1990s (Kinsella 1998: 314-316). In challenging binaries - man/machine, man/woman - and subsequent abjection, *otaku* resonate with feminist cyborgs. *Bishōjo* games foreground relationships to technology and the virtual feminine, providing an opportunity to reflect on these issues.

A free relation to technology

In his philosophical writings, Martin Heidegger extends the "question of Being" to the question of technology. For Heidegger, technology is revelation: "It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *techne* is a bringing-forth … Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *aletheia,* truth, happens" (Heidegger 1993: 319). Taking up the examples of the windmill and hydroelectric power plant, Heidegger argues that technology fundamentally alters the human relationship to the earth, and to being itself, which is more obscured by complexity. The essence of modern technology, "enframing," puts humans into a position to reveal the actual, which is concealed (Heidegger 1993: 329). Heidegger sees humans engaging technology as capable of "supreme danger" and "saving power" (Heidegger 1993: 332). The danger is that technology becomes determinant of its truth, rather than humans becoming cognizant of concealed truth. The salvation of technology is witnessing the unfolding of its essence. It is not about mastering an instrument so much as revealing its inner workings. Technology, then, is not a problem to be solved, but a condition to be understood.

Thomas LaMarre applies Heidegger in his discussion of anime and its vision of salvation from the technological condition (LaMarre 2009). Salvation not from dystopia or disaster, but from narrow understandings of technology as a loss or gain for humans, which leads to a drive to oppose or optimize technology, often without considering its essence. That is, technology becomes determinant of its truth rather than revealing truth. LaMarre points out that a "free relation to technology" is possible when attention is gathered and focused in such a way as to reveal the technological ordering of the world (LaMarre 2009: 53). This free relation is characterized by release and openness. LaMarre sees in the animated films of Miyazaki Hayao new ways of thinking technology. Indeed, the director is using the technology of the moving image to reveal truth. In Miyazaki's works, young girls, or rather those in the distinct existential category of *"shōjo,"* tend to experience technology as a condition, and thus are most often associated with salvation. It is through the *shōjo* that release and openness become possible. LaMarre writes:

> "Heidegger thinks that some being, object, or entity must appear to impart constancy to openness and receptivity. … Heidegger calls the new object that will ground a new understanding of reality a god. … [Miyazaki's] *Castle in the Sky* makes a very similar move. While the story leaves us suspended at the moment of releasement with a vision of new rootedness, its animation offers a figure who brings content and constancy to its imagination of characters angled toward the earth: the girl" (LaMarre 2009: 84-85).

Figure 1: In this scene from Miyazaki Hayao's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), the female character is associated with ancient technology, her jewel, which shines as she floats. It is the key to ultimate salvation or destruction for the male characters. Image courtesy of Studio Ghibli.

The *shōjo* reveals and displaces boundaries, and then becomes "a new god" grounding a free relation to technology. While LaMarre is only concerned with Miyazaki Hayao, even a cursory survey reveals that the *shōjo* is not unique to the vision of any single director or creator; she is ubiquitous in Japanese anime, manga and video games. In many of these works, especially those targeting *otaku,* the *shōjo* is positioned as a god that provides salvation. It is no coincidence that otaku, as intimate as they are with technology, are fascinated by *shōjo.* Perhaps the best example of this is provided by *bishōjo* games.

Criticisms of gaming and pornography

Before proceeding, it is necessary to first briefly address general criticisms of contemporary media culture, specifically gaming and pornography, which intersect in *bishōjo* games. The perspectives introduced here are not proposing direct media effects, but a form of indirect influence. Gary Cross warns of a "sensual intensity" that comes from living in moments of personal pleasure (Cross 2008). He argues that the "culture of intensity" comes from men rejecting "adult" responsibilities and restraints because the power and meaning associated with them have been eroded by socioeconomic change; at the same time, consumer society encourages us to extend childhood and its pleasures indefinitely (Cross 2008: 240). A prime example of this, Cross writes, is video games:

> "What makes video games so absorbing goes beyond the carefully calibrated 'payoffs' of emotional 'hits.'

> More broadly, it is the sense of engagement and often control in the illusory world of the video game. … The need to interact with anything but the screen seems to vanish and, as many critics have noted, social (and political) skills atrophy or don't develop. … As we have seen, these pleasures, disassociated from memory or anticipation of the future, become essentially sensual. The problem isn't their sensuality as such but the addictive intensification of pleasure" (Cross 2008: 224-225, 247).

The basic concerns are isolation and "addictive intensification of pleasure," which carry over to pornography. Michael Kimmel argues that people in contemporary consumer societies are surrounded by images of eroticized women (Kimmel 2008). He worries that this might lead to a sense of entitlement and misunderstanding of sex: "Pornography rarely enhances our sex lives; it is more likely to impoverish it, reducing emotionally complex erotic encounters to a few-minutes formula of physical acrobatics" (Kimmel 2008: 171). Sex in pornography is "all form and no content, all body and no soul" (Kimmel 2008: 189). For Kimmel, the virtual universality of instant gratification may hinder the development of real social relations (see also Turkle 2011), and the intensification of pleasure - from "little black dots" on the pages of magazines to flashes of light on the TV screen to megapixels on the computer monitor - may contribute to a lack of interest in sex with other humans. Both Cross and Kimmel make strong arguments, but a consideration of *bishōjo* games brings into question some of the core assumptions about videogame violence and pornographic pleasure.

Bishōjo games

Erogẽ are "erotic games" of simulation for the personal computer, sometimes ported to consoles.[6] Though these games are rather uncommon outside Japan, they are a large domestic market, estimated at 25 billion yen annually (Galbraith 2009). There are about 200 makers accounting for 400 brands. As few as four or five people[7] can create a game and sell several thousand copies; a very popular game might sell 150,000 copies (Galbraith 2009). Because they only require still character images, scrolling text and a basic program to relate them, *erogẽ* provide a cheap alternative way to tell stories, which is outside the corporate structure and open to new (and young) creators. Women also are well represented, often in the role of character designers;[8] it is important this, and that the objects of desire here cannot be reductively described as "male fetishes." There are an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 devoted players in Japan, mostly male, who regularly buy games that cost between 7,000 and 10,000 yen each (Galbraith 2009).[9] Because of the focus on interactions with characters (discussed below), these games are well suited for merchandising, including character sculptures, computer accessories, "hugging pillows" and so on. Merchandise serves to extend (and potentially expand) interactions with favorite characters and legitimate connections.

The most popular type of *erogẽ""* is *bishōjo* (beautiful girl) games, sometimes called *galgẽ""* (girl games), which focus on interactions with beautiful girls.[10] These interactions can be shockingly violent and perverse (rape, torture, incest, etc), but are tolerated in Japan. Obscenity laws long banned the depiction of genitals and pubic hair, but pay little attention to the context or content of depicted sex acts (Allison 2000: 149-150). However, despite the wide range of possibilities, most games are remarkably tame. The central interaction is dating, so popular and prevalent a theme that *bishōjo* games are as a genre sometimes called "dating simulators" or "dating sims" outside Japan. Dating in *bishōjo* games tends to be among youth in middle or high school.[11] The world is seen though the playable character's eyes, a male who rarely appears on screen. Backgrounds are static and change when he changes locations; they are often recycled. Onscreen text describes the place and situation. When the playable character encounters a girl, she appears on screen; she has a unique design (exaggerated hair style, costume, personality) to distinguish her from other female characters. Two-dimensional (usually hand-drawn) images are preferred, because they are cheaper to produce and look better than three-dimensional (computer-generated) polygons when viewed close up.[12] She is mostly static, alternating between different poses based on the onscreen text and her reactions to the situation. As with the backgrounds, these posed character images are also

recycled. Animation is costly and time consuming, and avoided by all but the largest makers.[13] Usually, the main female characters have dubbed voices, but the playable male character does not. His words, thoughts and actions are described in text. At certain points, usually in dialogues, options appear in the text. These options may seem trivial, but based on them the player’s avatar might end up impacting interactions and relationships with female characters. At certain points in encounters, the player might see erotic still images, ranging from depictions of female characters in various states of undress to explicit sex. There are multiple girls that the player can interact with, and, in most games, multiple possible stories and endings as an outcome. Players replay the game multiple times to “clear” the different “branches” of the story.[14] Clearing the game can unlock extra options, scenes, girls (as targets of interaction) and endings.

Figure 2-5: Screen shots from *Welcome to Pia Carrot!! G.P.* (2008), demonstrating how backgrounds and character reactions change based on situation and dialogue. These still images are typically recycled. Reproduced with permission of Cocktail Soft and F&C. Co., Ltd.

In one of the only articles published in English on the topic, Emily Taylor proposes that *bishōjo* games be considered "interactive anime/manga with erotic content" (Taylor 2007: 198). She aligns them with anime and manga rather than games to stress the limits of interactivity. In some *bishōjo* games, the first option may appear an hour or more into the game; some games have fewer than 10 options and half an hour can elapse between them (Taylor 2007: 197). Azuma Hiroki points out that "novel games," which focus on more complex stories, have even more text and fewer options (Azuma 2009: 75-76). Passivity is encouraged by the mechanics of the game system, which may include settings to make the text scroll at a set rate and proceed automatically. The player is unable to drastically impact or change the narrative reality. The player is also unable to choose an avatar; the playable character is fixed, but at the same time remarkably undistinguished (his face, when shown, is often obscured), an "empty shell" and set of eyes through which to see the exciting world full of young women (Taylor 2007: 198). Despite the sharing characteristics of spectatorship and a visual aesthetic, however, Azuma stresses that *bishōjo* games are distinct from anime, in that the former has a larger cast of female characters and more possible storylines; the player adopts "multiple-personalities" (*tajū jinkaku*) as he or she replays the game, chooses different options and opens up new narrative possibilities (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003b: 216).

'Mechanical sex,' unstable gender

The question of what *bishōjo* games do for players is a complex one. Taylor argues they are essentially a way to reaffirm masculinity (i.e., for *otaku* to fight back against association with *shōjo*).[15] She suggests that the playable character is always in control, not only of himself and his sexuality, but also of women and their sexuality:

> "The protagonist seeks to remove each woman's supposed power and reveal her 'true form,' which is one of weakness and the desire to be subordinate to men. … Dating-sim games appear to be presenting an *akogare* (longing) of men, in which relationships are simple because women have no needs or expectations and may even *enjoy* the imperfections in their male partners" (Taylor 2007: 201-202).

This certainly may be part of the appeal of *bishōjo* games, but this paper would like to explore the possibility of pleasures other than those associated with indulging "masculine" fantasies of domination and empowerment.[16] To begin, it is unclear if the fantasy in these games is necessarily masculine. Reacting to some aspects of Saitō Tamaki's psychoanalytical approach (see Saitō 2007), Azuma challenges that *bishōjo* games center not on "possession" (*shoyū*), supposedly masculine, but on "relationships" (*kankei*), supposedly feminine (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003: 189). He argues for

understanding *bishōjo* games as "mechanical sex" (*kikai teki na sei*), or a systematized looking at cute girls and simply reacting; there is not a strong compulsion to set a subject position and possess objects (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003a: 184-185). One is rather "multiply oriented" (Saitō 2007: 227) to the object. There is a need to go beyond rigid gender binaries when discussing *bishōjo* games (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003b: 199).

Indeed, just as easily as they might be described as masculine, *bishōjo* games might be described as feminine. Despite Taylor's assertion that the playable character is never emotional, or is in control of his emotions, Azuma proposes that much of the appeal of these games is that they allow players to lose control and become emotional (Azuma 2009: 79). There is an entire genre of *"nakigẽ,"* or "crying games," devoted to making players cry as they watch the romance and struggles of the female characters unfold.[17] Azuma notes a trend in *bishōjo* games away from sexual content towards "melodrama" (Azuma 2009: 78-79),[18] which has been described as a "women's genre" (see for example Kuhn 2000). Even more tellingly, there exists an entire genre of "nurturing games" (*ikusei gẽmu*), which collapse together male and female roles.[19] The instability of gender appears even at the level of identification. As Azuma sees it, "in many *galgẽ*…the target of empathy is the girl" (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003b: 199). This is an extremely provocative statement that deserves some explanation. If the male character is emotionless, and his penis is censored or replaced with unfeeling objects, it follows that all expressions of pleasure are projected onto the female characters. Akagi Akira argues that this situation - common in pornographic manga, anime and games (see Allison 2000, especially chapters two and three) - encourages men to "get caught up" in the ecstasy of female characters (Akagi 1993: 232).[20] There are constant close-ups on the faces of female characters, which is in stark contrast to the male character, whose face may not be depicted at all. This not only includes depictions of sexual pleasure, but also the excessive (i.e., extreme and prolonged) emotional responses of female characters. This bias in expressivity encourages identification with female characters (see also Nagayama 2003 for a discussion of a similar dynamic in erotic manga for men).

Figure 6: In this close up from the game *Clannad* (2004), notice the enormous eyes of the female character brimming with tears. Even though this game is known for its relatively charismatic male protagonist, he cannot compete with the expressivity and raw intensities of the featured female characters. Image courtesy of Key.

Indeed, the object of desire, even when desire is sexual, is not necessarily "woman." *Bishōjo* games do not contain depictions of vaginal penetration. Even in erotic images, female characters tend to be more or less clothed. LaMarre points out that the focus of desire in manga, anime and video games, even when pornographic in function or effect, is not the genitals, but rather the "voluminous folds" that conceal them (LaMarre 2009: 231). The fluttering and flowing of clothes, associated with energy and desiring, has been described as characteristic of *shōjo,* with the small caveat that *shōjo* are, as Honda Masuko describes them, "something evanescent, something that has no shape or actuality. Should we risk articulating this idea in words,

we might label it 'the illusion of beauty'" (Honda 2010: 32). Not only women long for the transcendence and liminality of *shōjo.* Akagi makes this clear when he states that what men desire is not real girls per se, but rather a sort of "girl-ness" (*shōjo sei*), symbolized by "cuteness" (kawairashisa) (Akagi 1993: 230). The female characters in *bishōjo* games are not representing three-dimensional women in their visual design or their personalities; the scenarios they find themselves in are equally unrealistic. These characters are based on what Saitō calls a "fictional context" (*kyokō no kontekusuto*) that is "deliberately separated from everyday life" (Saitō 2007: 227, 245). Not only does the woman not exist, as Lacan stated,[21] but she is desired precisely for that reason. Woman is "psychologically fetishized and technologically spectralized," an object of desire that cannot be possessed fully by anyone (LaMarre 2009: 251). There is an ironic awareness that what is desired is fiction itself.[22] Despite what Lacan and Saitō believe, it is increasingly difficult to talk about a strictly "male" subject position, gaze or mode of desiring.

While this is "mechanical sex," interacting with the female characters in *bishōjo* games is an affective experience. This can be understood by considering the possibilities of moving images. Gilles Deleuze theorizes a crisis in cinema when the action-image was no longer able to coordinate all other movement-images; the result was the time-image, which drew out possible interior movements (LaMarre 2009: 197). For LaMarre, anime, especially series produced for television with lower budgets and "cel counts" (frames per second), is overwhelmingly comprised of time-images. Force is redirected from character animation to the composited layers of character design, which are featured in still shots and close-ups (LaMarre 2009: 298). This leads to an emphasis on "soulful bodies," or "bodies where spiritual, emotional, or psychological qualities appear inscribed on the surface" (LaMarre 2009: 201).

Figure 7: This character from *Seven-Colored Drops* (2006) demonstrates well the notion of a "soulful body," with "spiritual, emotional, or psychological qualities" inscribed on the surface. Image courtesy of UNiSONSHIFT.

One might say that this is a "revealing" of humanity, though not in the Heideggerian sense. Rather, it is using technology to open up a gap with the actual and explore the virtual dimensions of the human (Boellstorff 2008: 238). The female characters of *bishōjo* games are soulful bodies par excellence, practically not moving on screen and virtually bursting with the force of emotions, inner movements. In a complete reversal of Kimmel, this "pornographic content" might be described as no body and all soul. As Cross suggests, the experience is about intensity, but in the sense of *affect,* or what Brian Massumi describes as a moment of unformed and unstructured potential (Massumi 2002). *Bishōjo* game players become aware of the structure of their own desires, identifying affective elements of character design (as well as personality, situation, etc) and constructing what Azuma calls a "database" (Azuma 2009) from which pleasure can be mechanically manipulated and (re)produced.[23]

'Game-like realism'

Bishōjo games also reveal new perspectives on "reality" and subjectivity. Azuma suggests the existence of "game-like realism" (*gẽmu teki riarizumu*), notable for its lack of a single narrative with a beginning, middle and end (Azuma 2007: 142). He highlights the existence of "meta-narratives" (*meta monogatari*), or narratives that are aware of (or draw attention to) their structure and form. Building on Itō Gō's discussion of *"kyara,"* or character icons (Itō 2005), Azuma point out that characters in games can exist outside narratives, in multiple narratives and between narratives (Azuma 2007: 133-134). At the same time, these characters maintain their identities. Such characters are able to reflect on the structure of the game itself, as well as the reality of the player. The other way around, the player is operating the world, or has access to different strands of narrative potential and straddles these realities. *Bishōjo* games offer a clear example of game-like realism, as they are attempts to reconcile multiple threads of narrative (Azuma 2007: 180-181). It is no surprise that characters in these games often talk about "alternative realities" and "parallel universes," referring precisely to the other branches of possible narrative. The player becomes aware of the meta-narrative by playing through all the branches and seeing their connections (Azuma 2009: 110-11), or is enabled by the technology of the game to reflect on reality and subjectivity. The revelation is of dissociative behavior, multiple viewpoints, time slippage, compulsive repetition and so on. As schizophrenic as this may be, it increasingly resonates with the logic of late-capitalist society. In this way, *bishōjo* games reveal the "grand nonnarrative"[24] that players live but cannot see.

'Techno-intimacy'

Contemporary practices surrounding *bishōjo* games demonstrate how boundaries are displaced and a free relation to technology opened and grounded by the virtual girl. Consider *LovePlus,* a *bishōjo* game developed and published by Konami for the Nintendo DS portable gaming device and released in Japan in 2009.[25] The female characters retain a two-dimensional look, though they are polygons, and an "anime aesthetic" is apparent in their appearances and voices. The game begins with the player's avatar transferring to a new school, where he meets one of three main female characters. Interactions with her in "friend mode" follow the standard pattern of *bishōjo* games (using the same basic system). If successful, the player enters "lover mode,"[26] where the "game" becomes a set of open-ended interactions. For example, the player earns points so that he can ask his girlfriend out, which can be set for a certain day and time. In the reality of the game, it is possible to go on trips, for example to a hot-spring resort, and some players overlap their lived experience by actually going to a physical location during these "events." In 2010, the game was ported to the iPhone with new "augmented reality" functions. Users can go to the Konami website and print off "AR markers," which they place anywhere and photograph to see an image of their girlfriend "inhabiting" their reality. Reality is tested and transgressed, or rather expanded by adding another layer. No one is confused about how "real" the augments are, but there is a pleasure in straddling fictional layers and exploring virtual potential (Saitō 2007: 227). Videos of interactions with *LovePlus* are posted online, encouraging users to experiment with ever more extreme boundary play.

LovePlus is notable for the intimacy players develop with their machines, but it is certainly not entirely unique in this respect. Rather, intimate relations with machines are becoming the norm in Japan. Katsuno points out that advances in bipedal technology in the 1990s saw a renewed public enthusiasm for robots, along with a discourse about the robot "heart/mind" (*kokoro*) and a drive to accept them as "companions" (Katsuno, forthcoming). This stretched far beyond the ranks of robot builders and watchers. Anne Allison highlights the rising prevalence of "techno-animism," which is both "animating contemporary technology and commodities with spirits" and "reconfiguring intimate attachments" (Allison 2006: 13, 21). This goes back at least as far as the phenomenon of virtual pets such as Tamagotchi in the 1990s. Allison explains that performing menial tasks and care "gives 'life' to the virtual pet and intimacy to the bonds formed between people and their machines" (Allison 2006: 166). The physical appearance of the pet is less important than the relationship one forms with it. Here Allison applies Sherry Turkle's idea of "evocative objects," which evoke something deeply personal in users (Allison 2006: 183). Users are moved to experience such objects as intelligent, and may attribute affective states to them. Allison calls the Tamagotchi, or rather the device which stores the virtual pet, a

"nomadic machine," which functions to "expand personal access to… intimate attachments…that would otherwise be limited to specific places and times" (Allison 2006: 164). There is a constant sense of connection and an expectation of instant communication. Intimacy is established through regular interaction and intermittent demands, both of which cannot be deferred lest the Tamagotchi perish. "As Foucault would note, play here is a disciplinary regime in which players become disciplined into assuming the subject position of (virtual) caregiver" (Allison 2006: 172). Interacting with the Tamagotchi as if it were alive is productive of intimate bonds with both a virtual entity and a physical machine. This is what Allison refers to as "techno-intimacy," and it certainly seems applicable to the case of *LovePlus,* perhaps even more so given the nature of the interactions with the virtual girl/machine.

Though not necessarily related to gaming machines, Katsuno provides some useful tools for examining *LovePlus* in his ethnographic account of robot builders and the intimate relations they form with their creations. According to Katsuno's informants, robots have heart/mind (*kokoro*), which emerges in a twofold dialogic process: private interactions (internalization) and public performances (externalization) (Katsuno, forthcoming). Creators invest their robots with heart/mind in prolonged intimate interactions, and the heart/mind is affirmed (reified) in social settings such as exhibitions and competitions. The robotics field in Japan "intends to define and develop the robot's heart not as a freestanding entity but in the relational context between humans and robots" (Katsuno, forthcoming).[27] This resonates with Allison's description of Tamagotchi as an evocative object. Experiencing the robot's heart/mind as real impacts how one relates to the non-human and understands his or her own humanity. In "tinkering" with the robot, then, one also tinkers with humanity (Katsuno, forthcoming). This is not to say one becomes "posthuman," but rather gains new understanding of and affirms humanity through the non-human other. The need to feel the "robot's heart" is to imagine the possibility of "heart to heart" communication, which is to say human communication (Katsuno, forthcoming). Engaging humanoid helps Katsuno's informants discover a "recuperated humanity," reconnect to self and others and (re)establish intimate relationships (Katsuno, forthcoming). This longing for humanity is perhaps at the heart of the desire for technology, and also *bishōjo* games, which celebrate the virtual humanity of the female characters, the expressivity of the non-human.

While Katsuno takes up the specific case of humanoid robots, the discussion can be extended to any machine with which humans have an intimate relationship. The obvious example would be personal computers, which are placed in one's private space and interacted with on a daily basis (LaMarre 2009: 243-244). This is especially true for *bishōjo* game players, who spend more time more regularly with their computers, and whose attention to technology is gathered and focused by the virtual girl. However, while fulfilling the personal interaction criterion for heart/mind, such machines do not necessarily facilitate public interaction, where heart/mind is performed and attachments are affirmed. *LovePlus* makes both interactions possible. When the technology is personal and portable, players can take their devices out into society and publically interact with them and with others. Examples include taking one's Nintendo DS on dates, spraying it with women's perfume, buying one's virtual girlfriend gifts, visiting resort towns and insisting on a more expensive reservation for two, even holding a ceremony to marry one's virtual girlfriend and kissing the bride (i.e., the machine). In statements by *LovePlus* players such as "I sleep with my DS," there is an acute awareness of the (techno-)intimacy built up with the physical machine housing the virtual object of desire. This all points to humans treating machines as companions, imagined much the same way as Katsuno's robots to have heart/mind (which emerges through the private and public interactions). This is not to say that *LovePlus* players are confused about what it real and think that their handheld gaming devices are autonomous beings with souls, but they do enjoy playing with the machine and performing bonds with the virtual girl, accessed through and directed at the machine. Even if this is done in part as an in-group joke or for the benefit of others, it also strengthens attachments by allowing bonds to be extended from private to public space, where they are performed, witnessed and affirmed. There is a social dynamic here, in which the machine is a part. For example, players link up their DS machines so that their girlfriends can "talk" to one another, typically about their boyfriends and relationships. Players have no control over what their girlfriends say, and so listen (perhaps along with spectators) and communicate with each other (sharing

"man time" parallel to the machines' "girl time"). This publication of the private, this sharing one's machine and linking fantasies, has two results: one, social interactions between humans are mediated by the machine, and two, a space emerges to imagine heart/mind in the performance of the virtual girl/machine.[28]

Given Katsuno's description of the robot as companion, it is tempting to consider the portable gaming device, in the specific case of *LovePlus,* in the same way, or in terms of what Haraway calls "companion species" (Haraway 2003). While Haraway's work on the cyborg may seem a more likely candidate for this theoretical exercise, the cyborg is just one part of the "queer family of companion species" (Haraway 2003: 11) that function to bridge gaps between binary categories, to "bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure" (Haraway 2003: 4). Haraway writes that the relationship between companion species is characterized by "partial connections" (Haraway 2003: 20-25); it is a mutually constitutive, continuous "becoming." One might recall Katsuno's idea about tinkering with humanity. While Haraway is most interested in animals, she admits that companion species is an "awkward term for a not-humanism in which species of all sorts are in question… Companion species is a permanently undecidable category, a category-in-question" (Haraway 2008: 164-165). This seems to allow for the possibility of a technological companion species. For her part, Allison agrees that "imagination" is a vision of the life form - be it community, pet or human - that feels real and to which one relates (Allison 2006: 178). The imagination of a "significant other" is real.

In her *Companion Species Manifesto,* Haraway takes up the example of dogs and advocates understanding and communication, in her case demonstrated by the interspecies sport of agility exercises. To demonstrate the potential of technological devices as companion species, it is useful to consider "interspecies" interactions in *LovePlus.* A ready example is provided by the "touch event," which comes at unexpected times, an intermittent demand to which the player must respond regardless of time or place in actual reality. When one's virtual girlfriend is in the mood for "skinship," or "physical" intimacy, the player makes use of the Nintendo DS stylus to touch her. Just as the agility exercise requires the human and dog to act as partners, the touch event demands harmony between man and machine. The success of the interaction depends on knowing the speed, pressure and pattern of touching preferred by the virtual girl (which varies by character). The machine registers the touch of the stylus and responds accordingly. When stimulated, the virtual girl says something to the player and the machine projects her audible voice. To avoid unwanted attention, the player usually wears headphones, and is thus literally connected to the machine. Imagination is routed through bodily intimacies; touch, sound and sight all play a part in the joining of the human handler and technological companion. If both the actors perform well, the touch event can end in a kiss (which also requires sensitivity, and so is usually executed with the stylus for precision sake). This is not a man simply manipulating a machine, but a complex interaction requiring empathy.

Figure 8: Photograph of a "touch event" in *LovePlus* (2009).

To be perfectly clear, the goal of this comparison is not to equate pets and machines - dogs and gaming devices/virtual partners - or to imply that interactions are the same. However, in both cases there is a formation of intimate relations with companions (imagined or not) and a "mongrelization" of differentiated categories. The machine here acts as what Allison calls a "bodily prosthesis," which "works not as an extension of the human body but as a built-in part" that rebuilds the parameters of the body (Allison 2006: 187). She is not talking about a cyborg mixing of machine and flesh, but the interactions between Tamagotchi and their handlers. Allison explains:

> ""In this sense, a player must enter into the screen, filling it up…[with his or] her own presence, which merges with that of the machine. … In this case, what is bred is a companion, 'partner,' and pet: an imaginary creature with which, thanks to its technological stimulation of life, a player can both mimic and create a 'social' relationship" (Allison 2006: 187).

This holds true for interactions with *LovePlus.* It also approaches what Haraway calls "the open," where what is to come is not fixed by teleology or function and might still be otherwise (Haraway 2010: 2). This is the process of "becoming with a nonhuman partner, of worlding in the conjoined mindflesh of multispecies tangles" (Haraway 2010: 2). As Haraway suggests, this open is more ambitious than perhaps even Heidegger advocated. Likewise, the free relation to technology observed among *bishōjo* game players is perhaps far and again more liberated.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the issue of human being with technology, specifically those identified as *"otaku"* in Japan and the *bishōjo* games they play. It took as its point of departure Heidegger's approach to technology as revelation and its essence as enframing (Heidegger 1993), combined with LaMarre's theory that the girl or *shōjo* is the image of "a new god" opening and grounding the possibility of a free relation to technology (LaMarre 2009). It reviewed how *bishōjo* games destabilize gender in "mechanical sex" (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003a), desire in "database" (Azuma 2009) and subjectivity in "game-like realism" and "meta-narratives" (Azuma 2007). Finally, it extended Allison's ideas on "techno-intimacy" (Allison 2006) and Katsuno's treatment of "heart/mind" in robots (Katsuno, forthcoming) to the case of *LovePlus,* and suggested how humans might be open to becoming with a technological "companion species" (Haraway 2003, 2008, 2010). Perhaps it is in "becoming-woman," as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari phrase it (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 227), such a part of the *bishōjo* game experience (Azuma, Saitō and Kotani 2003a,b), that *otaku* are more open to other possible becomings. It is unclear why women should experience technology as a condition, but it is clear that some men are working through issues of being with technology, and turning to women for salvation. They are tinkering with the machine and with humanity. In the process of intimate, empathetic and communicative interaction with the thinking machine, these men tend to be "feminized." *Otaku* are considered abject because they are *not* performing masculinity in socially recognized ways. They are in fact problematizing, even parodying masculinity by exposing and tinkering with their desiring-machines. With *bishōjo* games, *otaku* are attempting to understand the machine, self and world, and exploring relationships between these things.

Endnotes:

[1] Speaking on the issue of "virtuality" (Allison 2006: 178).

[2] See for example Lisa Katayama's video report on the Boing Boing website: http://boingboing.net/2009/11/24/footage-from-the-fir.html

[3] Even before WWII, there were 19 million newspapers circulated a day in Japan, more than one per household. Japan was one of the most print-saturated nations in the world by 1980, when 4.3 billion books and magazines were produced (Schodt 1983: 12). The circulation of Japanese newspapers in 1997 was 53.8 million, with Yomiuri alone circulating 10 million copies a day. All five of the "key" TV stations (which feed to affiliate local stations) are in Tokyo. The

city boasts 41 percent of the nation’s newspapers, 79 percent of publishing companies, 98 percent of major journals and magazines, 79 percent of comic publishers, 49 percent computer software companies and 89 percent of music and recording companies. For details, see Fujita and Hill 2005.

[4] In 2008, over 96 percent of high school students had cellular phones. Being connected, every day, all the time, is a precondition of social participation, but also so economical that many have no “land-line” telephones at all. According to a 2008 survey by Net Asia, as many as 22.3 percent of Japanese self-identify as cell-phone addicts.

[5] Susan J. Napier points out that technological empowerment has been a prominent theme in Japanese fantasy during its modern experience (Napier 2005: 86). She adds that another important image is the woman, who seems most to capture the transformations (and related anxieties) sweeping modern and modernizing nations (Napier 2005: 11-12).

[6] These interactions run the gamut from *yarugẽ,* which focus simply on sexual encounters, to novel games, which focus on complicated stories. There are also many other varieties, including *otome* games, where the protagonist is a woman going after beautiful boys, and “boys love,” where the protagonist and love interests are all male.

[7] Dividing the basic tasks of story writing, character designing and programming, and possibly also musical scoring. Other roles, for example dubbing, are contracted.

[8] Famous examples include Itō Noizi, Nishimata Aoi and Hinoue Itaru.

[9] Recently, more women are playing, including relatively high-profile individuals such as Momoi Halko and Inui Yōko.

[10] According to Azuma Hiroki, the *bishōjo* game genre was created in 1982, proliferated in the early 1990s and reached its peak in the late 1990s. Novel games became established after *Droplet* by Leaf in 1996 (Azuma 2009: 75). It should be noted that the “harem” formula of multiple girls (with incredible variation and personality) surrounding a (mediocre) male protagonist began earlier with Takahashi Rumiko’s manga, *Urusei Yatsura* (1978-1987).

[11] One game creator, Maeda Jun, says this is a convention because it is the only time when romance can be imagined as “pure,” or unrestricted by socioeconomic concerns (personal interview, December 18, 2009).

[12] Konami’s *Tokimeki Memorial 3* in 2001 was an attempt to render characters with three-dimensional polygons, but it received a negative response from fans. By Azuma’s estimation, two-dimensional images developed due to technological conditions, but became an expression of the internal reality of the game, which players continue to embrace long after videogame graphics have advanced (Azuma 2009: 75-76). This point was expanded on in a personal interview (October 16, 2009).

[13] Like most games, there is a soundtrack, but it often features “character songs” performed by the voice actresses.

[14] There may be a status window to show how much of the game has been cleared.

[15] Many men were *“shōjo-ized”* in the shift to a service economy, and they turned to *shōjo* characters to negotiate a new orientation. Sharon Kinsella suggests that the *shōjo* is the form that most captures the tensions and concerns of male viewers, who both abuse and identify with her to navigate an ambiguous gender position (Kinsella 2006: 83). The *shōjo* is a performance scripted by and for men. That is, men produce/perform the girl to be consumed by other men.

[16] Being “in control” might be less important than Taylor believes. Azuma argues that one of the pleasures of these games is realizing that one is not in control (Azuma 2007). As Taylor points out, the player cannot change the rules and in-game reality, and cannot radically change the narrative. S/he knows that certain events cannot be avoided, but watches the build up and sees them from multiple viewpoints (Azuma 2007: 180).

[17] The history of these melodramatic games begins with a company called Elf. One creator, Hiruta Masato, authored *Classmate* in 1992. It was an erotic game with elements of romance, but you could double or triple time girls without consequence. However, responding perhaps to the popularity of the quintessential high-school romance simulator, *Tokimeki Memorial* (1994), *Classmate 2* in 1995 was revised to be a route to true love with one girl. It was melodramatic romance and was set in a school. Another creator at Elf, Kenno Yukihiro (now Kanno Hiroyuki), made *The Girl who Sings Love at the Edge of this World, Yu-No* in 1996, which was even more melodramatic. This was followed by game creator Leaf's Takahashi Tatsuya, who made *Droplet* (1996), *The Scar* (1996) and *To Heart* (1997). *To Heart* was partially a parody of school romance dramas, but players were moved and it became a hit. In 1997, Tactics Brand released *Moon,* described as a "Psycho Brute Adventure Game that Moves You to Tears." The next year they released *One: Towards a Shining Season,* often identified as the first *"nakige."* The word became established with Key's *Kanon* (1999), *Air* (2000) and *Clannad* (2004).

[18] This point was expanded on in a personal interview (October 16, 2009). In a separate interview, Honda Tōru made a similar argument about *bishōjo* games in the 1990s (personal interview, September 26, 2009). He sees a trend away from sexual exploits, which offer only surface pleasure, to finding true love, which is "deeply soothing for players" in a lasting way.

[19] The most famous of these is *Princess Maker* (1991). While initially a platform where a male character raises his daughter with the option of marrying her, later editions of *Princess Maker* present the player the option of being a mother, reducing the explicit sexuality. This seems to imply a sort of "mothering gaze" (Kaplan 1983), perhaps still about power and control, but in a very different way than the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1989). This is not to say that the male player is not gazing at (and perhaps sexually desiring) his "daughter" onscreen, but simply to suggest that it may be a complex engagement.

[20] Carol Clover makes a similar argument about men watching horror films, who at times identify with emotional women rather than their monstrous attackers (Clover 1992).

[21] Or rather she exists, but as a "symptom of man" created for his ontological consistency (LaMarre 2009: 236).

[22] One informant, "Ishizaki," a 28-year-old engineer in Tokyo, recalled playing a *bishōjo* game on his computer at home one night, and at a critical moment noticing his reflection on the screen. He said that this made him aware, uncomfortably so, that he was alone with his desiring-machine, in his room and not in the game. "The characters don't look like me or any human anyway, but it made me aware how far removed I was from that world." Others were equally willing to self-analyze, especially where the appeal of their favorite characters were concerned. They could break them down into elements and explain precisely why these elements "work" for them.

[23] Unlike anime, where the layered cels that comprise the image are only available only to the producers, *bishōjo* games make the layers of the image available to the consumer as packets of digital data (Azuma 2009: 80-83). Characters can be removed from their backgrounds and placed outside the original narrative reality. Exploring the layers of virtual potential in the character is open to professional creators and fans empowered by knowledge and technology.

[24] The "grand narrative" breaks down into multiple "small narratives," which further collapse into moments of "sensual intensity" (erotic or emotional climax), all existing in parallel disassociation (Azuma 2009: 84, 108).

[25] *LovePlus* was a very popular game for the Nintendo DS, and despite the family-oriented reputation of Nintendo and *"otaku"*-orientation of the game, it received wide media promotion. When a new model of Nintendo DS with a larger screen was released in 2010, images of the girls of *LovePlus* were used to showcase the product. These appeared in public, for example on the Yamanote loop line in Tokyo, exposing average people to *bishōjo* games for the first time.

[26] There is also "LovePlus mode," which is not in real time and

includes talking to the girl, mini-games, a clock and timer (she tells the time) and an alarm (she wakes you).

[27] Quotations refer to an advance draft of the article received by the author.

[28] Allison notes something similar of Tamagotchi users, who sometimes have memorial services when their virtual pets "die" (Allison 2006: 176). Also similar are "Tamagotchi breaks," where users relieve stress and feel comforted by answering the needs of their virtual pets (Allison 2006: 185). *LovePlus* users also take comfort in spending time with their girlfriends, even escaping to the bathroom at stressful times during the day. The pleasure is also a familiar experience, to touch the machine and feel its weight.

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