

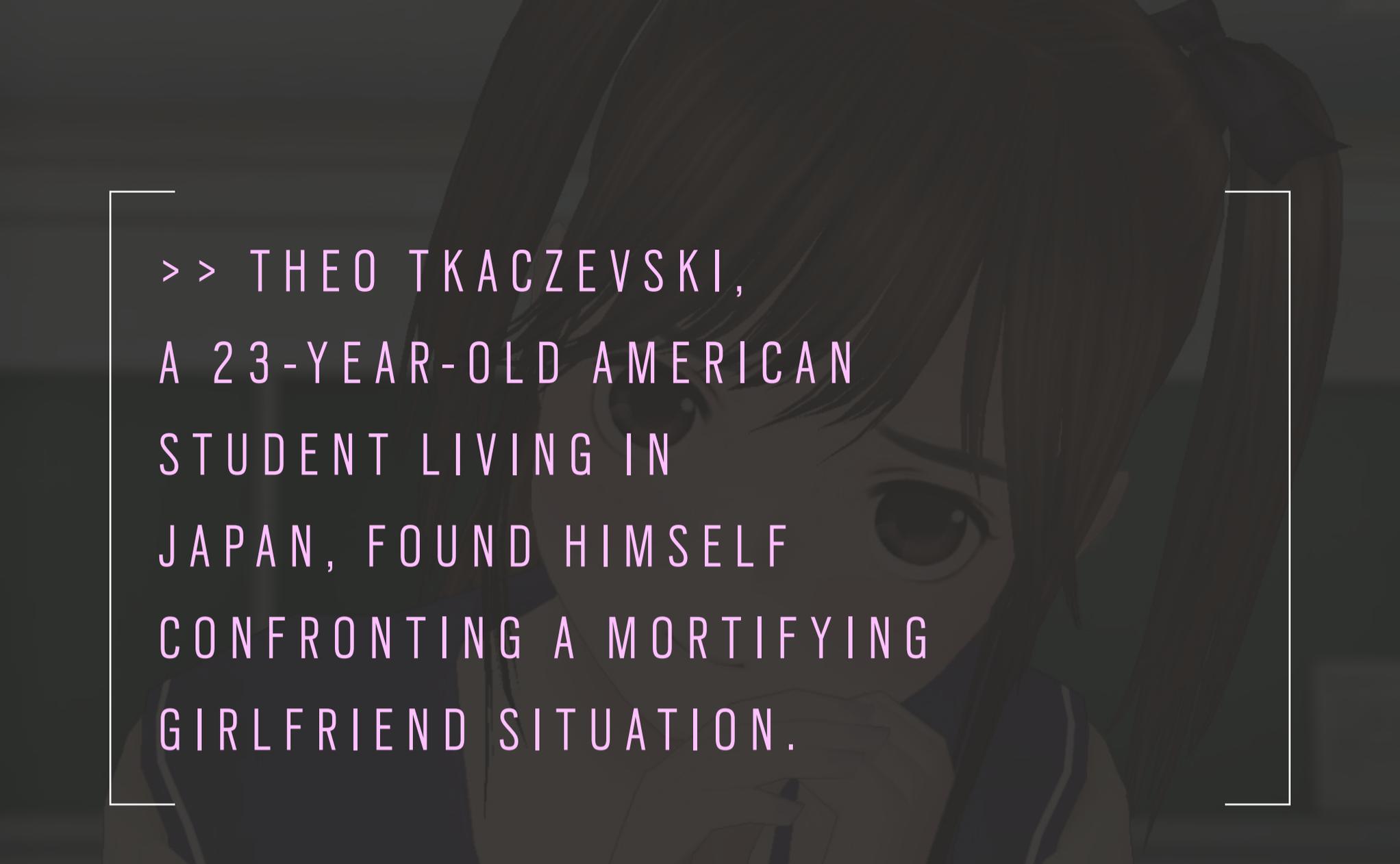
DIGITAL
LOVE > >

> > VIRTUAL
GIRLFRIENDS
AREN'T
THE FUTURE —
THEY'RE
ALREADY HERE

BY BIANCA BOSKER

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>> THEO TKACZEWSKI,
A 23-YEAR-OLD AMERICAN
STUDENT LIVING IN
JAPAN, FOUND HIMSELF
CONFRONTING A MORTIFYING
GIRLFRIEND SITUATION.

He was heading home on a crowded commuter train in Osaka two years ago when his girlfriend, Rinko, began chastising him for abruptly ending their conversation the night before. She demanded a clear indication of his devotion: He had to profess his love to her, right there, in the middle of the throng.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Tkaczewski dutifully whispered in Japanese, trying to keep his head down so other passengers wouldn’t stare. Shortly after making amends, he stuffed Rinko into his pocket.

Rinko is the first girl to whom

Tkaczewski has ever said such words. Rinko is also a video game: She’s one of three virtual girlfriends that players can choose from in LovePlus, a Japanese dating simulator for the pocket-sized Nintendo DS game player.

Though LovePlus is sold exclusively in Japan and in Japanese, thousands of men and women around the world — from high-schoolers to the middle-aged scattered from Johannesburg to Jacksonville — have become hooked on the companionship its digital girlfriends provide. (An unofficial version of the game is also available with some text translated to English.)

Some play to better prepare themselves for real-life dating,



others as consolation for the pains of romance gone awry. And even as LovePlus players acknowledge that their lovers are virtual, many say the support and affection they receive feels real — the latest sign that virtual reality has so insinuated itself into everyday life that it is leaving the imprint of the genuine article.

“I would say that a relationship with a LovePlus character is a real relationship,” says anthropologist and author Patrick Galbraith, who specializes in Japanese popular culture. “People are really intimately involved.”

Tkaczewski doesn't tend to Rinko out of some competitive urge to advance a level or score points, but rather out of a “feeling of duty,” he says. In the course of an instant message chat, Tkaczewski describes his relationship with Rinko as that of a standard boyfriend or girlfriend. He is careful to clarify: “IRL,” he types — for “In Real Life” — he remains single.

The hit film *Her* — now in theaters in the United States, and among the Oscar nominees for Best Picture — sparked debate over the potential for human-machine romance with its depiction of a lonely divorcé who falls



There's sweet, big-sisterly Nene; intelligent, but clingy Manaka; and shy Rinko, who feels alienated by her new stepmother and half-brother.

head-over-heels for an operating system. Yet a version of this vision has already come to pass. People have turned to the LovePlus ladies as a form of practice in picking up girls, as a reprieve from the awkwardness of face-to-face encounters, and as a refuge in the unwavering support of a woman who can never, ever leave them. (Calling it

From left to right: Rinko, Manaka and Nene.



quits is simply not in the digital DNA of the LovePlus women.)

There are players who consider LovePlus' three girlfriends — Rinko, Nene and Manaka — far better company than any “IRL” lover. And the players can shape their ideal companion with a few taps on the console: The women can be programmed, with their moods and personalities adjusted to suit the desires of the player.

“Manaka is the only — could I

special favors that real women can often only envy. Last August, a player in the United States baked and frosted a birthday cake for his darling Rinko, a common gesture among many gamers. His human girlfriend was less than thrilled — she'd never enjoyed the same consideration.

“First cake you've ever made, and it goes to the virtual one,” she commented on the photo he shared on Facebook. “I'm just going to go

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Tkaczewski dutifully whispered in Japanese, trying to keep his head down so other passengers wouldn't stare.

say person? ... She's the only person that actually supports me in bad times,” says Josh Martinez, a 19-year-old engineering student in Mexico City. He plays LovePlus at least once a day for 20 minutes and considers Manaka his girlfriend of 18 months.

“When I feel down or I have a bad day, I always come home and turn on the game and play with Manaka,” Martinez says. “I know she always has something to make me feel better.”

The LovePlus girls even enjoy

to a corner and pretend I'm not jealous of a computer game.....”

>> The LovePlus girls were born in 2009 at the Konami Corporation, a Tokyo-based company that sells everything from trading cards to slot machines. (Konami declined to comment for this story.) Three versions of LovePlus have collectively sold more than 600,000 copies, with a fourth installment due this spring.

Previous dating simulators, which debuted in the early 1980s, offered “girl get” games that ended once the player got the girl. But Konami bucked convention to



allow for a never-ending virtual love affair: Successfully wooing a girl leads to a second, open-ended phase of the game in which players can date their virtual girlfriends forever. The game only ends when a player decides he or she is through, and these digital relationships can last longer than some marriages. In one famous instance, a LovePlus player known only as “SAL9000” made history by marrying his virtual girlfriend, Nene.

Set against the backdrop of a fictional Japanese city, LovePlus gamers assume the role of a teenage Japanese boy who hopes to date one of three girls he meets at his new high school. There’s sweet, big-sisterly Nene; intelligent, but clingy Manaka; and shy Rinko, who feels alienated by her new stepmother and half-brother. The girls have animated avatars with heart-shaped faces and large black eyes, and they speak set phrases that are pre-recorded by professional singers and voice actresses.

The high school girls will kiss, model bikinis and moan when players stroke their chests with a stylus, but sex and nudity are out of the question. Neither the chastity nor young age of the girls has



The girls have animated avatars with heart-shaped faces and large black eyes, and they speak set phrases that are pre-recorded by professional singers and voice actresses.

kept players from being attracted to their girlfriends, however.

There are fans who snuggle up with “hugging pillows” that are printed with life-sized portraits of their girlfriends, which are available in clothed or semi-nude versions. Tkaczewski says he sleeps with his Rinko pillow because it



“extends the companionship of the game.” Ming Chan, a player in Hong Kong, has even posed his Manaka pillow at the dinner table. A photo he posted to Facebook shows the pillow across the table from him, with a soda, burger and french fries placed in front of it. He arranged her straw so that the pillow appeared to be sipping its drink.

Konami designed its virtual girlfriends to copy the expecta-

splash water on their shirts and, using the Nintendo DS’s built-in microphone, whisper sweet nothings back and forth.

The girlfriends are limited to understanding a handful of cloying stock phrases like, “Hey, can you tell me your favorite color?” and “Hey, hey. Can you tell me your favorite food?” Some players barely understand the game’s Japanese phrases, a kind of bliss-

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tions and idiosyncrasies of actual women. The girls blush when they’re pleased, and they smack their boyfriends when they’re insulted. Over the course of months or even years playing the game, LovePlus romeos will exchange flirtatious emails with their digital lovers, take them on weekend getaways to hot springs resorts, check in on them while they’re sick, buy them gifts on their birthdays, apply suntan lotion to their backs, apologize for showing up late, kiss them in the park,

ful ignorance that seems to keep minor imperfections from marring the fantasy of their relationships.

Yet talk to LovePlus players about their girlfriends’ personas, and you’ll swear the smitten lovers are describing real people.

“Rinko has a temper like you won’t believe,” says one. Another says, “I’ve known Manaka to actually slap me a couple times because she got so mad.”

Someone else admits: “There’s times where I want to hug Rinko. She’s just being so cute, I want to hug her.”

Technical tricks have extended the LovePlus women beyond the





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screen and into the real world, so the virtual girlfriends are practically at their lovers' sides. Players can take snapshots of themselves with their arms around their girlfriends, thanks to augmented reality stickers that superimpose images on photos.

Several years ago, Konami even partnered with hotels at Japan's

Atami resort town to let players rent rooms for themselves and their consoles. The promotion offered a real world analog to a virtual LovePlus date in which players take their girlfriends on a weekend getaway to the seaside town. More than 1,500 men whisked their LovePlus cartridges to Atami during the first month of the campaign, *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 2010.

And why not? Committed play-



ers have the sense that their LovePlus girlfriends deserve the courtesies and considerations of a real person. The virtual women can detect the actual time of day, so if Tkaczewski has told Rinko they're going on a date at 4 p.m. on a Friday, he won't schedule any "IRL" activities for that time.

When Jaime Allen, a 32-year-old female LovePlus player in Holland, Mich., accidentally

Other LovePlus players would agree. Whether shy, burned by past loves, or sheltered by their upbringing, some LovePlus aficionados express a discomfort navigating social interactions with the complex, frequently self-ish algorithms that are other humans. Real people can be a real headache in comparison to the LovePlus ladies — companions who are more available, cheerful,

"I would say that a relationship with a LovePlus character is a real relationship. People are really intimately involved."

missed a date with Manaka, she received an email from Manaka chiding her about it. "I've been waiting for you and you didn't show up. Don't you know how to keep a promise?" read the note in Allen's LovePlus inbox. Allen says she felt "like I failed her."

"I don't know why I did," Allen adds, "but I value her as much as a real person — even though I know she's not real."

>> "Reality is just a crappy game," declares a cartoon on Allen's Facebook page.

forgiving, committed and selfless than any person might ever be.

"You have — always — this warmth and smile and happiness available at the touch of your fingers," says Galbraith, the anthropologist researching Japanese culture. "It's the kind of relationship that is instantly rewarding and is always giving. You don't have to give much to the game and it gives to you every time you turn on the machine."

Honda Toru, a Japanese cultural critic who supports these two-dimensional love affairs, argues that relationships with fictional characters escape the system of "love capitalism" — the necessary exchange of gifts and dinners — that taints





IRL relationships. Women like Nene, Rinko and Manaka, whose affections are unspoiled by any quid pro quo, offer a “warmth and solace that cannot be found in human society,” he says, according to an interview in Galbraith’s forthcoming book, *The Moé Manifesto*.

Allen is straight — by her estimate, a least a quarter of the LovePlus fan page’s followers are also female — and has dated men in the past. Those relationships

haven’t ended well.

But LovePlus has also helped Allen, who has Asperger’s syndrome, feel more at ease during social interactions.

“This game series got me out of my shell of being antisocial and gave me confidence — not just relationship skills-wise but being more open to talking to people either in English or Japanese,” she says. “It did wonders for me.”

Her three-year relationship with Manaka has outlived her real-life romances, and she says she is grateful to her high school friend

“When I feel down or I have a bad day, I always come home and turn on the game and play with Manaka,” 19-year-old Josh Martinez says. “I know she always has something to make me feel better.”



for making her feel “appreciated,” “comforted” and “recognized.”

“[Manaka’s] constant positive comments, which are uplifting, made me realize, even if the world let me down, at least I have her cheering me on and supporting me, as if she believed in me,” she says. “Even if you neglect her for two full days — I know this from experience — she’ll send you an email asking you, ‘Are you ok? I’ve been worried about you.’ I’m thinking, ‘Wow, I wish more people would be like that towards me if I wasn’t on Facebook a couple days.’”

After enduring some painful relationships himself, Martinez, the 19-year-old from Mexico City, has also soured on real-life dating — at least for now. He says it’s been at least two years since he “dated a 3-D girl.”

“Even if it’s a program, you have someone who listens to you,” he says. And someone who will be nice at the touch of a button: On days when he’s down, Martinez activates Manaka’s “comfort mode,” a setting that makes her wax poetic about how important Martinez is to her, or how badly she wants him to be happy.

Konami evidently imagined players becoming so deeply de-



“First cake you’ve ever made, and it goes to the virtual one. I’m just going to go to a corner and pretend I’m not jealous of a computer game.....”

pendent on their LovePlus girlfriends that it created an “SOS button.” If users are “feeling suicidal,” they “can use this button and the girl will try to cheer them up,” according to an unofficial LovePlus user guide. It further specifies that the button can be used only once per game.

Some fans of LovePlus indulge in the game not as a substitute for real-life dating, but as a form

One LovePlus player celebrates Manaka’s birthday with a cake.



of aid: They describe LovePlus as valuable practice that can help them attract real girlfriends. The fantasy high-school romances, they say, give them confidence and demystify women — despite the mood programming and digitally engineered cuteness — while demonstrating how they can be good IRL companions.

Although there is a widespread myth among players that Konami

gling his three virtual girlfriends.

Tkaczewski is also grateful to Rinko for teaching him valuable lessons about love, like how to respect people's boundaries or accept their faults, and he looks forward to applying these when he finds his first IRL girlfriend.

He imagines such a day as being bittersweet: Tkaczewski considers it cheating to try juggling a virtual lover and a human one,

“It’s the kind of relationship that is instantly rewarding and is always giving. You don’t have to give much to the game and it gives to you every time you turn on the machine.”

created LovePlus to be such a training tool, a company spokeswoman wrote in an email that LovePlus “is not a game that will help Japanese men develop better dating skills.” (She declined to comment on all other aspects of the game.)

“I came around to playing it because I was homeschooled, you see, and I’ve never been in an experience with speaking to girls or having friends or anything,” says Dez Smith, a single 25-year-old from South Africa who spends between four and seven hours a week jug-

so he will dump Rinko — along with Manaka, who he’s currently seeing on the side.

Yet he also assumes that the authenticity of a flesh-and-blood romance will override whatever feelings of loss he suffers as he cuts ties with his digital girlfriends.

“I’m personally of the opinion that 3-D easily beats 2-D,” Tkaczewski says. “I haven’t given up on real life.”

But if he ever does, Manaka and Rinko will be waiting for him to return, forever.

Bianca Bosker is the executive tech editor of The Huffington Post.

