Merging Ludus and Mimesis: Playful Engagements with NPCs on TikTok

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Keywords

playfulness, non-player character, TikTok, social media trend, meme, mimesis, ludic

Summary

The paper combines ludic and memetic perspectives to understand the tension between variation and repetition in playful practices. Using the 'NPC trend' on TikTok as a case study, the analysis shows how non-game spaces and technologies are used in playful ways, and how repetition and "re-presentation" (mimesis) are necessary components in the ludification of creator-audience relationships.

Abstract

A consequence of living in a ludic society is the ubiquity of games and playful practices, also in spaces and with technologies that at first sight do not look like games – such as social media platforms. In this paper, we use TikTok's 'NPC trend' as a case to explore emergent forms of playful interaction that challenge conventions about play, and merge with new logics of mediation and interaction, specifically memetics. By combining ludic and memetic perspectives, *ludus* and *mimesis*, the paper argues for greater attention to cultural practices such as repetition, imitation, and copying in both game studies and social media research.

As the name suggests, the NPC trend is based on TikTok users (people) pretending to be computer-controlled avatars (non-player characters) that their users (other people) can direct and manage through simple commands within livestreams. These commands are based on preset rules and are highly stylized. Viewers can buy little digital "gifts" for the NPCs, and as the creator sees it on the screen, they act out with their "pre-programmed" response. NPC streaming is based on mimicking the

repetitive actions of non-player characters in games, such as repeating nonsensical phrases and catchphrases, some of which have even evolved into internet memes and made their "players" famous (e.g. Pinkydoll 2023, see Fig. 1) – as well as rich (Stokel-Walker 2023). NPCs can then be analyzed as an instance of 'platform vernacular' (Gibbs et al. 2015), where simple catchphrases and repetitive actions become symbolic of the TikTok experience, in general.
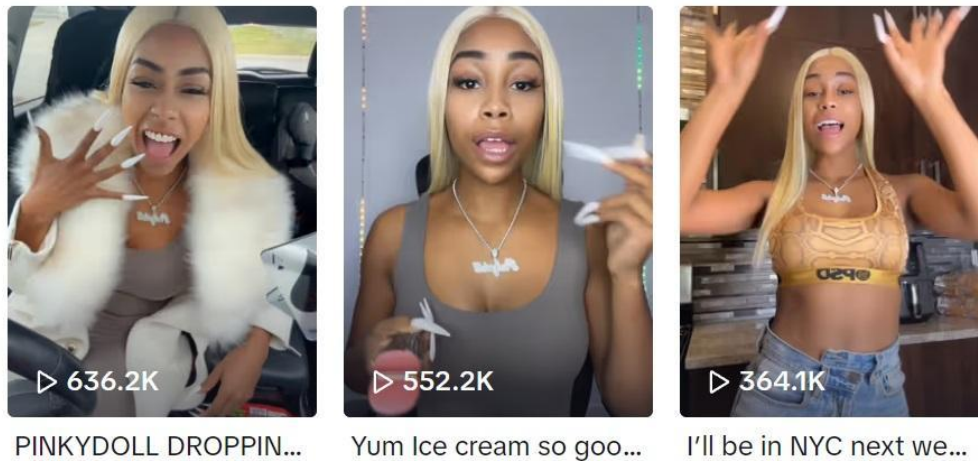

Figure 1. Examples of memetic content by the famous NPC Pinkydoll. An excerpt from Pinkydoll's TikTok feed (autumn 2023).

Our analysis is based on a selection (a convenience sample) of the most watched and liked NPC videos on TikTok. Our initial observation is that there is a lot of variety in how these creators enact their NPC performance with their audience, but there are also clear similarities. Most notably, the majority of NPCs on TikTok are women. On the one hand, we may understand this as a continued gendering of NPCs, where side characters and assistants throughout game genres tend to be female and/or feminine-presenting. On the other hand, the femininity of NPCs may also be understood as a reflection of the TikTok user base and culture where young women are prominent, powerful, and act as drivers of innovative entertainment practices. Together, the NPC trend appears a fruitful case to explore new configurations of play, gender, and technology.

To date, TikTok (ByteDance, 2018) has been considered a platform that fosters an exceptional range of playful new creations and interactions. The sheer variety of content and aesthetics, and how this content in turn is algorithmically curated for the individual user, is part of the platform's appeal. However, coupled with a creative and participatory culture geared toward continually making new and engaging videos, is a notable sense of repetition. For continuing trends to happen, users have to make and remake the same content again and again. Based on this, Zulli and Zulli (2022) describe TikTok as an imitation public, where mimesis, the "re-presentation" of content, is central, and where memetic logics and practices are shaping what stories are being told and in what way.

Many forms of playfulness on TikTok are related to meme-driven video-making and sharing. As an example, Natalie Collie and Caroline Wilson-Barnao (2020) analyzed the

#yeehaw challenge where TikTok users recorded themselves transforming into cowboys and cowgirls after drinking what became known as "yee yee juice" and lip-syncing "Old Town Road," a popular rap single by American artist Lil Nas X. Here, the memefication of the song rendered into a 'challenge' for TikTokers, and through its game-like features afforded new creations and more attention, which aided its popularity and considerably advanced the rapper's career.

Paying attention to memetics also involves analyzing the relationship between variation and constancy. A meme must change enough to be considered "new," yet remain similar enough so that it is recognizable as belonging to a specific genre and thus holding specific meaning (Milner, 2018). In this sense, memetic practices have interesting overlap with play practices.

We like to think of play as a diverse, complex, and multifaceted experience. And while this is certainly true, our penchant to highlight and celebrate the unique, special, and grand in the epic stories we create through our in-game choices easily overshadows the fact that much gameplay is actually very mundane and repetitive. Play practices like grinding are based on repeatedly doing seemingly boring tasks. And much like with memes, game designers have to balance sameness with variations as the game world expands. If progression is not coupled with enough new abilities, challenges, and milieus, the game will feel stale and repetitive. However, if too many new abilities, challenges or milieus are added, the game loses coherence. The balancing of variation and repetition are key in both ludic and memetic endeavors, and in our paper, we use the NPC trend to critically engage with this balancing act and its consequences in the context of social media.

The NPC trend is an example of human and non-human agencies blending together in new and interesting ways. It can be understood as a negotiation of the posthuman condition which grooms us to affectively react to online videos and interact in simplistic and repetitive ways, through clicking the screen. We can only speculate about the identities and motivations of the "clickers," but we can analyze the interaction we see in the NPC livestreams. An essential factor of live NPCs is also their appearance and the unavoidable fact that most of them seem to be female or feminine-presenting.

Challenging human exceptionalism across a range of dimensions is at the core of 'digital posthumanities', and feminist interventions may help us understand the mediated and material practices that make the boundaries between humans, technologies, and others bleed into each other (Holloway-Attaway 2018, p. 91). This focus on posthumanism also brings with it the promotion of interdisciplinary and cross-pollinating perspectives. In this paper, we apply a ludic lens to make sense of a playful social media phenomenon, while also expanding on what ludic might entail by combining it with memetic perspectives.

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