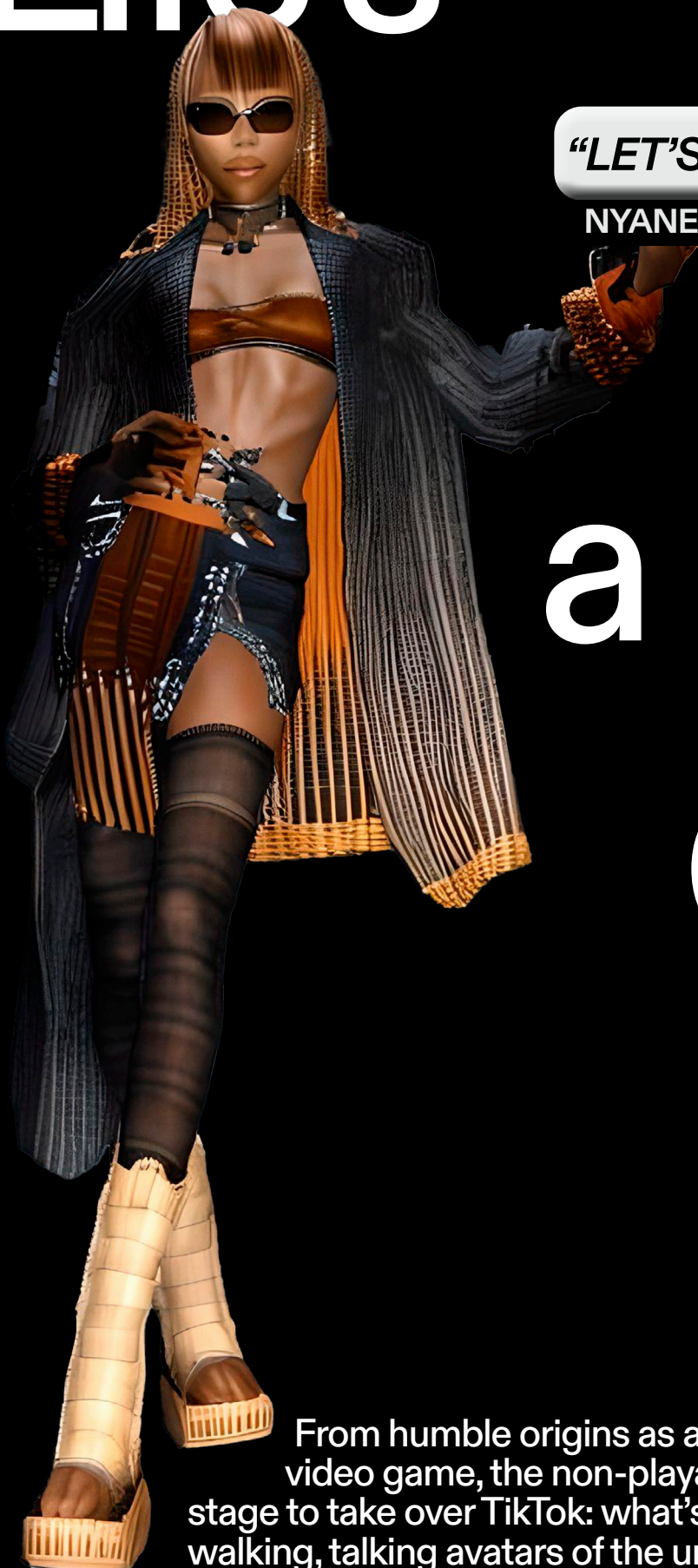


Life's



"LET'S DRESS ME UP!"

NYANE LEBAJOA

a

Glitch!

From humble origins as a walk-on role in your fave childhood video game, the non-playable character has moved centre-stage to take over TikTok: what's behind our obsession with these walking, talking avatars of the uncanny?



Harrison Flint was streaming live on TikTok from the streets of New York when he felt something splatter against him. He looked down to see egg yolk dribbling down his clothes, and up to see two guys passing on a bicycle, hurling more eggs his way. He grabbed his phone and gave chase, still streaming live to an audience of thousands. "We chased them," he says over video call, remembering the scene. "It was funny, because it was two kids on one bike, one riding in the front basket with his legs sticking out, like he was ET or something. I was sprinting my heart out down Broadway, but I couldn't catch up." Though the eggers escaped, Flint's eagle-eyed TikTok audience was able to identify them, and he filed a police report. Ultimately nothing came of it – without evidence of injury or property damage, the NYPD don't trouble themselves much with egg-throwing.

Flint is not the most obvious target for an egging. A 29-year-old New Yorker with a deep voice, square jaw and supernaturally perfect eyebrows, he's your typical hot dude, with a soulful singing voice and a background in classical ballet in case you weren't already convinced. But it's what Flint does on TikTok that attracts confusion and mockery. He's an NPC streamer, who goes live from the streets of New York pretending to be a character from a video game, repeating catchphrases and gestures like a malfunctioning robot every time a viewer gives him a digital gift. NPCs or 'Non-Playable Characters', for the uninitiated, are like the extras of the gaming world, computer-controlled avatars whose main purpose in life is to populate the scenery or drive the plot through a few lines of stilted dialogue.

It's weird as hell to watch a real human behave like this, but NPCs are a big deal on TikTok, and their popularity tells us a lot about this confusing moment in online life. The livestreamers are the strangest of the bunch. If the phrases 'ice cream so good' and 'gang gang' mean anything to you, then you've already witnessed this particular form of brain rot. For those who are blissfully uninitiated, here are the basics: a content creator goes live, staring blankly at the camera and waiting for viewers to give them 'emotes' – cartoon tokens like roses, lightning bolts or ice cream cones, which can be traded in by streamers for cash. When viewers send an emote in the chat, it's like they're pushing a button on a gaming controller, and the streamer responds with a corresponding gesture or line of dialogue. So give Flint a lightning bolt emote and he'll lift his arms in surprise and say, "Dude, you're shocking me, bro." Give him one hundred lightning bolts, and he'll do it a hundred times. The effect is curiously hypnotic. The longer you watch, the harder it is to look away.

One of the first NPC streamers was Japanese creator Natuecoco, who dresses like an anime cat-girl, but it was the Montreal-based former stripper Pinkydoll who sent NPC streaming mega-viral in the summer of 2023. She was the inspiration for Flint, AKA Harrison NPC, who sets up his phone on a tripod on the streets of Soho, in Manhattan, and goes live. With close-cropped blonde hair and chunky silver jewellery, viewers have dubbed him a Slim Shady cosplay act, but his NPC persona is more of a common street Chad – half the words out of his mouth are 'dude' or 'bro', the vowels stretched out comically like a fratboy who's just had his first bong hit. "It's the inner bro of mine that I can't truly express in everyday life," he explains, scratching the back of his neck and flashing a bicep.

He'll typically stream for an hour or two, during which he doesn't stick too strictly to only NPC animations. "I'm a very lax NPC," he says. "I also interact and come up with jokes based on the chat. My thing's more just being entertaining. I'm not a robot." When Harrison NPC does react to an emote, he might act

flirtatious, hungry, or sing one of his love songs – his singing even attracted an appreciative comment from SZA. In a recent Instagram video he sang some bars from a new song he's written, including the line, "I'm no Will Ferrell but will you get feral with me this weekend?" With the dollar value of the digital gifts ranging from one cent for a rose to \$600 for a universe emote (though he says those don't come often), Flint says he earns "almost a full salary" from NPC livestreaming. Pinkydoll, the biggest NPC streamer, has said she can make a total of \$10,000 per day (though this includes, in her case, selling adult content on OnlyFans).

Why do viewers throw so much money at NPC streamers? The fact that it's funny or strangely mesmerising might explain a few minutes of casual viewing while doom-scrolling, but it can't account for NPCs making thousands of dollars in just a few hours. A big part of the reason is that the viewers feel like they're directly involved in the action with NPC streamers – rather than passively scrolling down the feed, with NPCs they are engaging with the streamer in real time, even controlling them with gifts like a puppeteer. "It really is a kind of relationship," says Flint. "You're building a community." This new dynamic of live, reactive interactions between content creators and their audience was pioneered by video game streaming platform Twitch, and more recently adopted by TikTok. It's a way for creators to maximise attention and profits by keeping viewers engaged for longer time periods.

Another draw is the sense of anticipation that comes with watching a livestream. Often, when streamers go live on TikTok, it seems like there's not much happening. This creates an exciting sense of potential – anything could happen, and you could be there watching when it does. Flint says that he's had people hurl insults and eggs, follow him, even kiss him while he streams. "It's New York City," he says, "anything can happen." Fans particularly love it when NPC streamers break character. NPC Miles Morales, who cosplays as the first Black Spider-Man, is known to have a short temper and has offered viewers plenty of chaotic moments, including getting into fights, being mugged and even getting himself arrested live on TikTok. Once Pinkydoll broke character to scream at her kid in a mixture of English and French to leave the damn dog alone and go to his room, before switching back into her NPC character with unsettling smoothness.

The term 'NPC' lived a rich online life before Pinkydoll ever started streaming. It first emerged in the late 2010s as an insult among far-right commentators for those who mindlessly followed mainstream ideologies without forming their own opinions. It became a meme attached to the grey, expressionless face of a cartoon figure known as NPC Wojak, drawn on Microsoft Paint. Before the livestreamers, other content creators started making NPC videos on TikTok. Some of the first to go viral were Nicole Hoff and Oskar Szymkowski, a couple from the Polish city of Poznań who started making content in 2020. With more than three million followers on TikTok, the pair became famous for their NPC girlfriend videos, in which Hoff expertly imitates the janky movements of gaming NPCs, drawing on a whole generation's nostalgia for games from the era of *Skyrim* and *GTA: San Andreas*. She gets stuck in a supermarket fridge door, runs awkwardly into a wall and eats ice cream with her tongue lapping the empty air inches away from the cone.

While NPC livestreamers mine entertainment from the curious way NPCs speak, Hoff and Szymkowski emulate the way they move. Both are trained dancers and so are masters of observing and imitating tiny details of movement to create a convincing illusion. Each video mixes their dance talents

When you ask AI to make an NPC video:



My sims:



I took my NPC girlfriend to the music festival



**"AH, YOU ARE FINALLY HERE!
WE HAVE TO GO RIGHT NOW"**

OSKAR SZYMKOWSKI & NICOLE HOFF

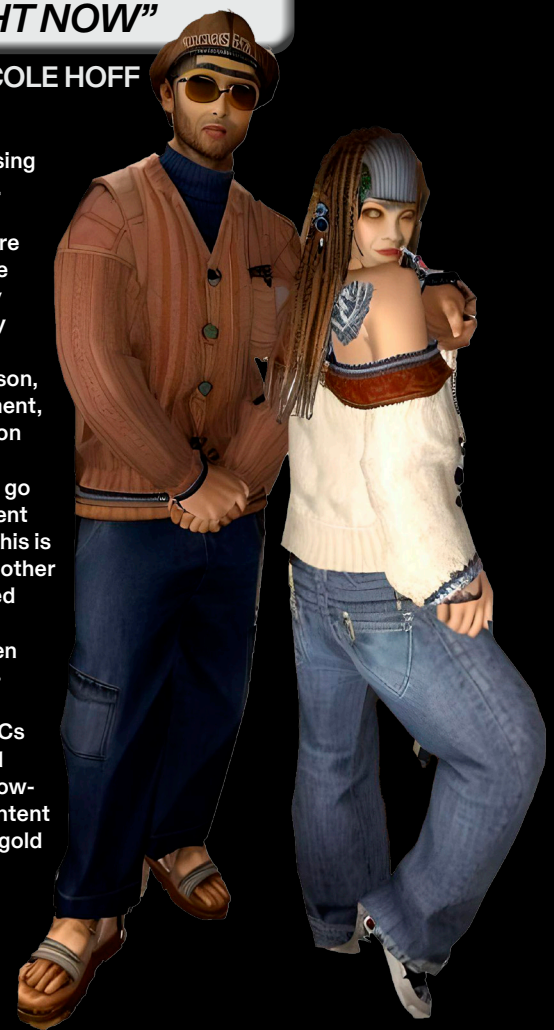
with sharp observational comedy satirising the most surreal moments from gaming. When asked how they manage to act so convincingly as NPCs, Hoff says there are a few special tricks: the dead-eyed stare where you look right through somebody and the 'idle animation' where your body sways even while still, breathing with exaggerated heaviness. If, for some reason, you wanted to perfect your NPC movement, the pair offer a series of training videos on their website for \$10.

While social media trends come and go (remember Dark Academia?), NPC content has shown remarkable staying power. This is partly because it can be combined with other trends. You can throw in some whispered ASMR to an NPC stream, copy a dance routine in broken NPC fashion – hell, even Pinkydoll has started eating 20 cheeseburgers in mukbang videos now. One person pointing the way forward for NPCs is Nyane Lebajoa, a British make-up and fashion influencer with three million followers on TikTok, who had been making content for over a decade before finally striking gold by reinventing the NPC genre.

"After we did the NPC videos, it all blew up and everything changed," she says over a video call from her home in Amsterdam, wearing little make-up and a simple black turtleneck. This look could not be further from her online persona, who is usually dressed in high-concept anime fashion: think bubblegum pink hair, elaborate outfits and make-up which is always doing the absolute most. Her videos borrow their aesthetic from the character creation screen of a video game, where she cycles through different style choices, gradually constructing a look. It's all produced with slick professionalism by Lebajoa's boyfriend, Phil, built around ultra-quick edits of Lebajoa sighing, eating a snack, or offering little robotic comments on what she's wearing. A pair of shoes will zap on to her feet – first, black leather boots, to which she whispers, "Ugh, hate it." Then they're transformed into strappy white platforms which get an approving: "Oh, I love it."

Lebajoa thinks people like her videos because they combine fashion and make-up inspiration with an illusion of control created by the visual language of video games, quite like the NPC streamers. "People love the videos because they feel like they're involved in them, like a game that they're playing, even if they didn't pick the actual choices," she says. The fans love her. A top-rated comment on a recent video says simply: "Now THIS is content creation." Tapping into the NPC trend has changed her life, as it has for all the interviewees in this article, who were able to quit their day jobs and become full-time creators. The fame stretches offline, too. Lebajoa says she regularly gets recognised on the street based on her NPC content. "We were at a party recently next to Busta Rhymes and people were crowding around me instead of him. I was like – this is a bit awkward, sorry Busta!" she says, giggling.

Will the NPC trend die out eventually? Lebajoa doesn't think so. "NPC is definitely here to stay,



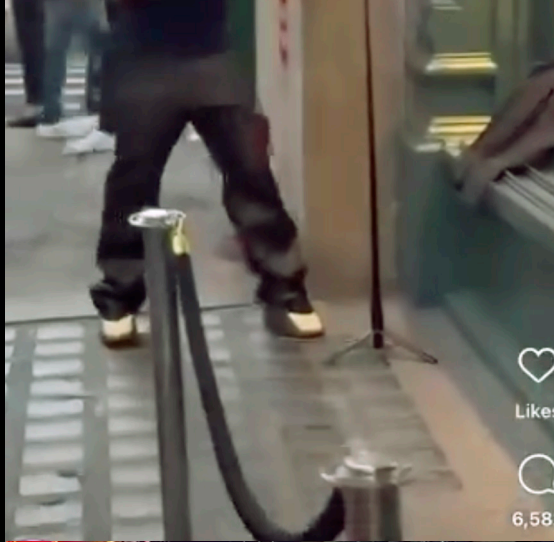
“WHERE’S THAT PARTY AT, BRO?”

HARRISON FLINT

it’s just about refreshing it and not doing the same thing over and over,” she says. “It’s never going to die because the games are never going to die out. So if the games are here to stay, NPC content is gonna be here forever.” Her boyfriend, Phil, chimes in: “NPC moved from being a persona to being more like an aesthetic for us. But it doesn’t stop surprising us how far this can go.” They have plenty of ideas for fresh content that uses new technology to evolve their craft, including using more augmented reality effects, creating video using generative AI and even creating an actual, playable game where you can dress up Nyane.

The fact that people are still watching NPC content after years suggests that it offers something more than entertainment – that it speaks to deeper questions in society. We are living through a moment where reality is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate from artifice. Elsewhere on TikTok, people debate fake news, stolen elections, AI-generated misinformation, even whether we might all be living inside a simulation. At a time when we’re confused about what it means to be human in the digital age, and AI increasingly behaves like humans, NPC content pokes fun at these ideas, offering a humorous outlet for our anxieties. The comments of every NPC video are filled with people wondering whether the stars are real humans or not, and the creators are thrilled by this confusion. “The best comment I got,” says the very real Nicole Hoff, “is that someone said, ‘I thought this girl is real, but now I see that she’s fake. She’s just a video game character.’ I was like – oh, thank you.”

Despite drawing from the same source of inspiration, the different NPC stars don’t all understand each other. Both Lebajoa and the dancers Hoff and Szymkowski admit to being confused by livestreamers like Flint and Pinkydoll. “They’re doing a completely different thing,” says Hoff. “We’re doing NPC stories focused on movement and comedy, and they’re not about that.” So what are they about, exactly? “That’s a good question,” replies Szymkowski, before a long pause. “The thing is, if people are watching it, if people are spending money to be a part of it, then...” he trails off, before Hoff finishes his sentence: “...then it’s working.”



things that suck about being a celebrity NPC

“Why do viewers throw so much money at NPC streamers, who [might be] making thousands of dollars in just a few hours?”