

\$7,000 a day for five catchphrases: the TikTokers pretending to be ‘non-playable characters’

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If you haven't seen them yet, the videos are mesmerizing. A content creator with long, straight hair sits at her kitchen table, rapidly stringing together nonsense catchphrases, over and over with the same cheerful expression and tone. “Yes yes yes. Mmm, ice cream so good. Ooh, you got me feeling like a cowgirl. Gang gang. Mmm, ice cream so good. Yes yes yes.” The trend is called “NPC streaming” – named after the non-playable characters in video games that awkwardly repeat pre-programmed phrases and movements. Its most recognizable face is Pinkydoll, a Montreal content creator whose “ice cream so good” clips went viral this week. Those phrases are actually her real-time reactions to gifts from her thousands of viewers, who send over digital ice-cream cones, roses, doughnuts and hearts, which pop up as cartoon graphics on the screen. The gifts are worth anywhere from half a cent to a few dollars – but with a big audience it adds up. In a full day of NPC streaming, Pinkydoll says she's netted more than \$7,000. Open TikTok now and you'll find plenty of imitators and parodies, each upping the ante of absurdity. One young creator sits in the tub fully clothed in a sombrero, greeting viewers in a robotic voice while feebly splashing water in a loop. Another comedian puts a children's sticker on her face every time somebody sends her a gift, until her face is almost entirely covered. She breaks character to explain in a stage whisper: “I need to take my kid to the specialty dentist and it's really expensive, OK?” It's as entertaining as it is disorienting. But culture researchers and streamers see layers of meaning in NPC streaming, as another example of the convergence between erotic work and gaming in online culture – one which also reflects our current anxieties over technology. At its most basic level, the NPC stream is a kind of an in-joke. Anyone who's played a role-playing game would get the reference: “They're picking up on all the ‘uncanny valley’ things about how NPCs behave in video games, all the conversational norms that NPCs violate, and then mimicking that,” says Stephanie Rennick, a University of Glasgow philosopher who has studied video game dialogue. NPCs “don't behave like ordinary people do, they're not offended if you make them repeat themselves over and over. They don't expect you to cooperate in conversation.” It's also not the first time that the idea of NPCs has entered mainstream cultural discourse. During the Trump presidency, far-right internet users began referring to liberals as “NPCs” – subhuman drones who mindlessly repeat talking points, they argued. The concept has also become popular among believers in the theory that we're all living inside a simulation – like Elon Musk, who tweeted last December: “if you don't think there's at least a tiny chance you're an NPC ... you're an NPC.” But NPC streamers aren't explicitly promoting a political message or conspiracy theory. If anything, they're simply carrying forward a kind of online performance that erotic workers have been honing for years, says Christine Tran, a University of Toronto doctoral researcher of internet culture and digital labor. “I think the NPC streamer can be understood as the media granddaughter of sorts to the ‘e-girls’ influencers that populated Twitch

and TikTok in the early 2020s,” she says. “These are also self-sexualized creators who built their followings by combining the aesthetics of gamer culture with cam girl influencing.” NPC streams aren’t just provocative because they violate conversational taboos; the most popular streams have an erotic undertone. Pinkydoll and another trending NPC streamer, Cherry Crush – a wig-wearing, elf-eared creator who barks and makes “nom nom nom” sounds – both maintain OnlyFans accounts with explicit content, but there’s nothing overtly sexual about their NPC streams. What these streams offer is “a sense of being able to control a creator, and we see control become a byword for feeling intimate”, Tran says. Think of it as a clever form of advertising. In the United States, a bipartisan set of laws passed in 2018 called FOSTA-SESTA effectively eliminated many of the websites that were set up explicitly for sex work, forcing many erotic workers to find more creative means to find audiences online. “By repackaging intimacy through the filter of gamer language – something we associate with youth – there is plausible deniability for these creators who are ostensibly partaking in a form of erotic work,” Tran says. Adopting the outlandish persona of an e-girl or an NPC streamer is also a way to stay safe from targeted harassment, Tran says. “These self-lampooning tactics like wigs and exaggerated faces obscure their appearances and other identifying details to protect privacy from the public eye under the guise of ‘being in character’.” And while it’s tempting to simply think of e-girls and female NPC streamers as hustlers reclaiming their agency from men, the more complicated reality is that the most successful creators tend to have “conventionally attractive, often light-skinned” bodies and “lean back on to acceptable forms of femininity”, Tran says. If anything, it reflects female NPCs’ narrow roles in video games. In a recent study of popular games, Rennick, the Glasgow researcher, found that compared with male NPCs, female NPCs are often given fewer lines of dialogue and paired with fewer emotions. “We think this is indicative of them being kind of background, less unique characters,” she says. Hayley DeRoche, a Virginia-based public librarian and TikTok comedian who often pokes fun at influencers, says she found the inane humor of NPC streaming fascinating. It seemed like a kind of response to oversaturated internet content: “Eventually, you run out of the easy stuff, and you kind of tilt into the absurd. “But I also think there’s that layer of being able to control typically a woman through the screen in a way that is not overtly sexual, though I’m sure it is for some people.” And of course, there’s the money Pinkydoll reported making – “which is a big push for people”. On Tuesday, DeRoche launched a satirical NPC stream claiming that it was to raise money for her child’s braces. For two hours straight, she improvised silly reactions – like putting a sticker on her face if she received a “gummy bear”, and donning a shark-shaped hat and yelling “chomp chomp chomp” if she got a rose. By the end, she was exhausted. “I have mad respect for people who are doing this for more than two hours a day – because it does take a lot of effort. You are using your brain a lot more than people think you are when you’re doing that type of thing, because you do have to remember what each thing means and respond to it in the exact same way every time. That said, it was honestly fun.” While her longtime followers knew she was doing a bit, many new viewers took it very seriously. “They were appalled and making comments about my body, all the typical things that happen when you’re a woman on the internet.” She made a couple of hundred dollars doing it, which will actually help with her son’s dental work. “Like, he does need braces. And here in America, that’s the way to do it,” she says. “Which was also kind of part of the joke. That yes, people are doing this. And yes, sometimes people do silly, desperate things for legitimate reasons.”