

V'S VIRTUAL AFTERLIFE: PERSONA ANALYSIS AS A METHOD FOR INVESTIGATING NONHUMAN ONLINE PERSONAS

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ABSTRACT

Nonhuman Online Personas (NHOPs) are coherent digital assemblages not directly associated with the identities of individual humans. NHOPs encompass entities like brands, places, artificial intelligences, and, as we explore in this study, video game characters. This article examines the NHOP of V, the customisable protagonist from the video game Cyberpunk 2077, to consider how such characters attain a virtual afterlife beyond the original text through collective fan engagement. We propose 'persona analysis' as a novel qualitative case study methodology for researching NHOPs. Our approach integrates netnography, analytic autoethnography and textual analysis, enabling a comprehensive examination of the emergent, unpredictable, and collective natures of online personas. Building on existing persona studies frameworks, we focus on the collective dimension of persona as the sets of negotiations between human and nonhuman actors through which the NHOP is constructed. Using V as a case study, we apply the five dimensions of persona—mediatisation, publicness, performance, collective, and value—to analyse the NHOP. Data was collected from online platforms where fan productions occur, including fan fiction, game mods, virtual photography, conversation, and discussion. This multi-platform approach allowed us to observe the extensive participatory practices of fans' co-construction of V's NHOP with its developers. Our analysis reveals that V's NHOP is a complex, rhizomatic assemblage resulting from the participatory interplay between in-game characters, fans, games designers, developers, the storyworld's creators, and intellectual property owners. By extending persona studies to encompass NHOPs, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how online personas are collectively constructed. This, in turn, challenges established notions of online identity grounded in selfhood and opens new possibilities for examining the co-creation of online personas across all media types.

KEY WORDS

Nonhuman; Paratextuality; Fan Production; Collective Dimension; Assemblage

INTRODUCTION

A nonhuman online persona (NHOP) is a coherent digital presence not directly associated with a human being. An NHOP might be a brand or a physical place, or it could be an artificial

intelligence. Persona studies has begun to explore the collective formation of NHOPs in different forms, including media types (podcasts), machines (robots) and fictional characters (video game protagonists) (see: Connell & Moore 2023; Holland 2021; Connell 2024). In this article, we investigate the NHOP of the computer game character, V, from the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, as it exists in a virtual afterlife of paratextual materials (Carter 2015) through a combination of official texts and user-generated fan content.

Cyberpunk 2077 is a multiplatform action role-playing video game developed and published by CD Projekt RED and released in December 2020. The game is based on the *Cyberpunk* tabletop role-playing game created by Mike Pondsmith and first published in 1988. Players take on the role of V, a customisable mercenary in the dystopian metropolis of Night City. Set 50 years in the future of an alternate history timeline, corporations have emerged from a global war as the dominant powers controlling highly advanced cybernetic technologies. The player, as V, works alongside Johnny Silverhand (Keanu Reeves), a charismatic and controversial anti-hero memory 'engram' inadvertently trapped in V's head via a malfunctioning cyberchip slowly erasing V's existence.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome—a non-hierarchical, decentralised network that proliferates connections in all directions—we consider the emergence of NHOPs as rhizomatic assemblages. This perspective expands traditional representational thinking, which imagines identity as a fixed and singular presence and pursues anti-representational thinking that encourages an understanding of persona as a multiplicity, a fluid process of constantly becoming. In the context of V's NHOP, the character's identity is not singular but a fragmented assemblage of diverse elements, including fan creations, game modification, and paratextual materials that collectively form a dynamic online presence. To help account for this fractalised nonhuman persona, we also draw on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2005), as it provides a framework for understanding the complex interactions between human and nonhuman actors in forming social phenomena. ANT recognises the agency of both humans and nonhumans and facilitates greater understanding of the emergence of online personas as negotiations between media, characters, fans, game developers, devices, platforms, and algorithms.

'Persona analysis', our proposed method crafted specifically for NHOP research, allows for the emergent, unpredictable, and collective nature of online personas, integrating netnography, analytic autoethnography, and textual analysis. We apply Kozinets' approach to distinguishing netnography from ethnography by "extend[ing] the strengths" of existing persona approaches, and presenting persona analysis as a refinement of these practices (2002, p. 62). A distinctive feature of persona analysis is the emphasis on the collective dimension of persona, those negotiations between human and nonhuman actors that a NHOP is reliant upon. We argue that V is an example of the complex persona assemblage resulting from the participatory interplay between the character, fans, and the game's designers and developers (Raessens 2005). We also focus on fan productivity in this context as the provision of an 'afterlife' or 'second life' (Telotte 1991) for the character, which operates independently of the intentions of the game's creators and exists solely for the enjoyment of the devoted fan audience and players.

In the following, we outline the theoretical landscape from which persona analysis emerges. We describe the novel qualitative methodology, methods, and research design of persona analysis, then demonstrate how the approach is applied to the study of V's NHOP as a distinctive case. By centring our analysis on V—an unstable, customisable character negotiated across industrial, ludic, and fan contexts—we employ digital ethnographic and persona-

oriented methodologies (Boellstorff et al. 2012, Milik 2017), draw on understandings of ergodic and transgressive play (Aarseth 1997; Chess 2017), engage with paratextual expansions and fan participation (Carter 2015; Consalvo 2007), consider the implications of gendered identity negotiations (Bergstrom 2019), and interrogate shifting power dynamics between developers, platforms, and players (Taylor 2018). The analysis thereby demonstrates how persona, fan, and game studies converge to illuminate the collective, nonhuman identities emerging at the nexus of participatory digital cultures.

INTERCOMMUNICATION, PARATEXTUALITY AND FAN ASSEMBLAGES

Persona studies investigates the construction and performance of public identities in the era of 'presentational media' (Marshall 2010), as online self-presentation has become a crucial aspect of contemporary life. Persona studies has described five dimensions of persona—mediatisation, publicness, performance, collective, and value—that have helped articulate personas as multiple, contextual, and strategically crafted assemblages (Moore et al. 2017). As a theoretical framework, persona studies highlights the agency involved in the mediatisation of the self. While recognising the structuring role of platforms and algorithms, it considers individual agency alongside the role of other humans and nonhumans in persona formation. A key example of this are persona micropublics (Barbour et al. 2017; Moore & Barbour 2016), which are not only the audience that forms around a persona, but active participants in the co-creation and negotiation of the persona, contributing to its collective dimension.

The concept of persona as a co-created, collective construct expands public identity beyond individual humans to include nonhuman entities such as algorithms, AI robots, places, objects, and animals (Holland 2021). These nonhuman online personas (NHOPs) emerge through interactions among human actors, platforms, technologies, and digital objects, forming distributed, posthuman identities shaped by micropublics. This challenges traditional notions of identity tied to individual selfhood. Fan studies, notably Jenkins (1992, 2006), Hills (2002), and Gray et al. (2007), have similarly explored the collective behaviours and influence of fans, particularly their role in shaping shared identities through affective engagement with media texts. Jenkins' concept of 'textual poaching', inspired by Michel de Certeau's (1984) work, demonstrates how fans actively contribute to the co-creation of media content. In the case of *V* from *Cyberpunk 2077*, fan-driven creations like mods and fan fiction reframe *V*'s persona as an assemblage, collectively shaped rather than solely authored by the game's creators.

French literary theorist Gérard Genette introduces the concept of paratext to describe the elements surrounding a core text that shape its reception. In the presentational media age, however, paratexts do much more than guide the reader's engagement with the primary text as Genette (1997) envisaged. Fans' textual poaching of *V*, through cosplay and creative character representation in artwork, fan fiction, and screenshots, extends *V*'s textuality beyond the game. But, as Švelch (2020) notes, identifying something as a 'paratext' that has not been published by its original author or owner is somewhat problematic, as they cannot take responsibility for that work. Thus, building on Connell (2024), we use the term 'paratextual' to describe the nature of fan productions. Rather than the definitive label of 'paratexts', which implies an ancillary relationship to a core text, we use 'paratextual' to align with the understanding of online persona as a collective assembly and intersection of game, fan activity, and digital media infrastructures beyond the confines of a single media text.

By recognising how fan micropublics utilise intercommunication on social media platforms to contribute to *V*'s online persona, we expand the discussion of personas without conscious 'selves'. Fan practices—sharing, reposting, liking, and commenting—collectively

construct V's persona alongside direct contributions like fan art and fan fiction. These rhizomatic media practices contrast with the linear logic of paratexts: there is no one definitive V. The character serves as an empty shell for players to enact. Fan productions surround the core game text and actively reshape the understanding and experience of V's persona beyond the game. As Chin (2014) argues, these activities raise the spectre of fan exploitation regarding the uneven power of media industries, even when fans often view their activities as part of the fannish gift economy. Agency is creatively distributed in the network that can be described as V's NHOP. As our persona analysis works to reveal, V's NHOP is fragmented and fluid, comprising a diverse range of elements that collectively contribute to the ongoing negotiation of the persona.

PERSONA ANALYSIS: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Persona analysis (Connell 2024, 2021; Connell & Moore 2023) is a qualitative case study methodology of empirical research design involving textual analysis, analytic autoethnography, and netnography. Building on Marshall et al. (2020) our methodology extends the investigation of persona beyond the human.

Emerging from an ethnographic tradition, the persona analysis method focuses on capturing complex cultures in situ, relying on qualitative methods and field observation as modes of discovery to develop explanations about phenomena that are uncooperative to controlled experimental trials (Boellstorff et al. 2012). NHOPs occur within and through cultures that are “emergently, dynamically constituted, constantly shifting, alternately undergoing periods of destabilization and stabilization” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 35) making the ethnographic approach particularly suitable. Marshall et al. (2020) also identify the value of ethnography for examining the tactics and intentions behind persona formation, with applications to gamer personas already explored in persona literature (Milik 2017). To observe the collective spaces and fan practices within persona cases, we employ netnography (Kozinets 2020, 2015, 2002), and analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006). We extend the traditional autoethnographic focus on studying and documenting cultures from the researcher's perspective (Ellis et al. 2010), to focus on five key ‘analytic’ elements: complete member researcher status (CMR), analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis (see: Anderson 2006). Figure 1.0 illustrates the persona analysis method, which utilises Lundström and Lundström's (2021) ‘explore, engage, examine’ framework from podcast ethnography as broad research phases, with Kozinets' six procedural movements for netnography (2020, pp. 138-143) nested within.

At the ‘explore’ stage, the ‘initiation’ and ‘investigation’ phases occur. Researchers determine the investigative direction of the study, identify a specific persona for examination, and narrow down and select field sites. Unlike Lundström and Lundström (2021), we do not consider the object of the case study (persona) as the field site. Instead, we acknowledge that examining official and unofficial sites is necessary to understand the NHOP. At this stage, the suitability of the persona is considered and its paratextual content is explored, including the mapping of key relations to investigate and later analyse various actors' roles in the NHOP network (Latour 2007).

The ‘engage’ stage encompasses data collection using netnographic methods, spanning Kozinets' ‘immersion’ and ‘interaction’ phases. At the ‘immersion’ phase, the conceptual focus of the research is specified through initial data collection and indexing through search engines. The ‘interaction’ phase involves participant observation beyond passive search and observation.

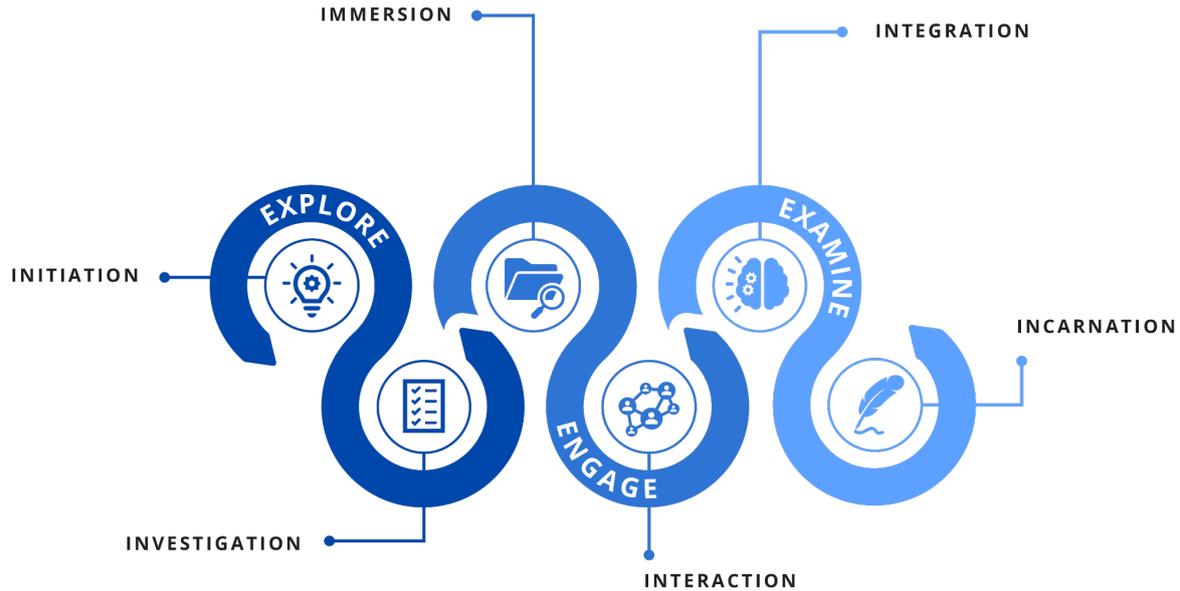


Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of the Persona Analysis method

By incorporating Rendell's (2019) application of Kozinets' (2002) netnographic method across these phases, we explore practices of collectively constituting a NHOP through online fan 'produsage' (Bruns 2013, see also Lewis et al. 2024). We emphasise multivariate performance interpretation and reception of NHOPs that involve producers, platforms, and micropublics in shaping, enjoying, and responding to the persona assemblage.

Finally, at the 'examine' stage, researchers analyse the material to develop concepts or themes related to the research question. For persona analysis, this comprises Kozinets' 'integration' and 'incarnation' phases. 'Integration' is an analytical and interpretative phase where researchers decode and translate collected data to gain cultural understanding. The 'incarnation' phase encompasses the communication of the netnographic method, data collection, dataset, and representation of data. During these phases, we implement the analytical portion of Anderson's (2006) autoethnographic approach to question the hierarchies and relational signifiers inherent in discussions of text vs paratext, production vs co-production and fictional character vs online persona. The methods for conducting persona analysis engage with the "explorative character" of ethnographic studies (Lundström and Lundström 2021, p. 290), allowing flexibility to fluctuate between research stages whenever necessary (Kozinets 2020; Lundström & Lundström 2021; Boellstorff et al. 2012).

Our data analysis process used an autoethnographic approach that focused on identifying elements that emerged as significant, unique, and particularly illuminating of V's NHOP. Data analysis involved three steps that account for the flexibility and emergence of data generated using digital ethnographic methods (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Firstly, preliminary reactions were noted in a field journal, differentiated from observational notes using a red font colour. These were shared with co-authors throughout the collection process to guide further data collection and to "place theories in dialogue with data" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 162) considering how dimensions of persona (Moore et al. 2017) and Deleuzian concepts were evident in the dataset. Similarly to Milik (2017), we employed a persona framework as a heuristic device to encapsulate the collective formation of V's persona via social interactions occurring through gaming and social media.

Secondly, field note and screenshot data (recorded using word processing, spreadsheet and screen capture programs) underwent systemisation for use in this article, by tagging material with labels to categorise data by fan production type: 'mods', 'virtual photography' 'fan fiction' or platform of interaction: 'Reddit', 'Discord', 'Flickr'. Then, this categorised data was coded based on key issues that emerged, such as gender, agency, and paratextual fan productivity. Thirdly, the data was thematised based on its relevance to the NHOP framework (public, mediatised, performative, collective, value dimensions), where we selected "critical moments" that exemplify the NHOP phenomenon "echoing through the culture in a significant way" (Boellstorf et al. 2012, p. 166). Thus, we adopted an 'epiphany' approach (Sinner 2021) at this stage, as our analysis was "deeply informed by the cultural knowledge we have gained" (Boellstorf et al. 2012, p. 173) through not only participant observation but previous embedding in play of the *Cyberpunk 2077* game and V's NHOP activity. This approach also aligns with the principles of analytic autoethnography, where personal and community engagement and high degrees of reflexivity inform the analytical process (Anderson 2006).

Applying Persona Analysis: Research Process and Data Collection

Our persona analysis began at the initiation stage by establishing the appropriateness, viability, and usefulness of the project (Connell 2024). V was selected as our case study based on qualities including being a nonhuman customisable video game character with multiple active online fan communities. To locate potentially relevant social media data, we utilised Kozinets' 5 steps to social media data collection - simplification, search, scouting, selecting, and saving (2020). First, we identified keywords based on the research questions, which we entered into search engines and social media platforms. We then selected focus sites based on Kozinets' criteria for investigative filtering (2020, pp. 226-230). At the scouting stage, we identified 33 potential field sites which we narrowed to 7 field sites: Archive of Our Own, Nexus Mods, Cyberpunk Game and Mods sub-Reddits, the Virtual Sightseers Discord Server, Flickr, and In-Game Photomode. Table 1 indicates the population of each site versus the sample size of users included in the study and acknowledges each site's level of publicness. According to Kozinets' definitions (2020, p. 173), a public site is accessible via Google search, and no login is required to view content. Sites with smaller memberships constitute a more private space. Our field sites had varying sample sizes and levels of publicness, representing a small, non-random, purposeful sample appropriate for phenomenological case study approaches (Merriam 1998).

Data was selected for inclusion based on systemisation process outlined above. Screenshot data was only included with creator consent, limiting the dataset. Fan fiction sampling followed a multi-stage systematic sampling approach (combining popularity metrics and every 10th story by comments and publication date), yielding 10 stories from Archive of Our Own and 5 from FFnet representing diverse interpretations of V.

The justification for each site's inclusion followed Kozinets' (2020) filtering system, which ranked sites between 0 (very weak presence of criteria) and 100 (very strong presence of criteria). Examples appear in Table 2.

Table 1: Included field sites for this study. Population and sample sizes are accurate to 15/10/2024.

Site Name	Type of site	Activity	Population	Sample	Publicness
V Cyberpunk 2077: Archive of our Own	Online Fan Fiction Platform	Autoethnographic observation, participant observation, screenshot collection.	5,531 works	15 fanfics	Public
Cyberpunk 2077 Mods on Nexus Mods	Modding Community Website		12,270 mods	49 mods	Public
r/Cyberpunk2077mods	Subreddit Community		4.3K members	4 posts	Public
r/cyberpunkgame	Subreddit Community		1.8M members	13 images 16 posts	Public
Virtual Sightseers	Discord Server		642 members	19 images	Private
Cyberpunk 2077	Flickr search term		24,724 images	9 Images	Public
Cyberpunk 2077 Photomode	Our own Virtual Photography		573 images	26 Posts	Authors' own work.

Table 2: Examples of field site selection and justification, using Kozinets scoring system (2020, pp. 230-231).

Relevance: data on the site relates to my research focus and question(s)	
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	100: Virtual photography Discord Server where users share in-game screenshots of video game characters, including V.
r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	100: A fan subreddit dedicated to V, from Cyberpunk 2077.
Activity: data on site is recent and regular	
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	100: Regular, daily activity on this server across several channels.
r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	40: Non-frequent posting in this channel.
Interactivity: data on site reveals two-way or multi-way communications between participants.	
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	100: Multitude of interactivity between participants, with technological and social structures in place to encourage this (points system, feedback, request, question, themed channels).
r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	50: Some two-way/multi-way communications afforded by technological affordances of up and down votes, posting and commenting. But little interaction due to inactivity.
Diversity: data on this site reveals different perspectives and different socio-cultural viewpoints.	
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	80: Invites critical thinking about socio-cultural perspectives on VP and games through question of the week. Demographically diverse members. But, all members are gamers and virtual photographers.

r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	20: The same user has made most of the posts, so there is a lack of diversity.	
Richness: data on the site is detailed and descriptive, providing deep contextual information.		
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	90: This site will provide a sense of fans' participatory engagement with VP as a fan practice, but may lack insight into motivations behind their performance of V..	
r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	30: Due to the lack of activity and diversity there is not enough rich data in this site to justify its inclusion in the study.	
Site	Final Score (out of 500)	Including in the study?
Virtual Sightseers (Discord Server)	470	YES
r/Cyberpunk2077_V (Sub-Reddit)	240	NO

We obtained ethics approval (University of Wollongong HREC Reference: 2024/105) before finalising the research question and selecting the case study at the transition from initiation to investigation. Ethical considerations were paramount when implementing online observational and screenshotting techniques, as users may consider public social media content private (Kozinets 2020). We obtained consent to access semi-private or private sites, adhering to our approved ethics procedures.

The immersion and interaction stages occurred simultaneously and sometimes before initiation and investigation, as two co-authors were active *Cyberpunk 2077* players and fans. Data collection occurred after ethics approval, fluctuating between engagement and examination and involving several modes of ‘doing’ (Connell, 2024). We engaged in a combined 325 hours of gameplay, extending our immersion into V’s persona onto social media, participating in fandom communities and specific fan practices like virtual photography, which utilises the game’s photomode to capture images of V (Moore, 2014). Experience with modding varied: the primary data collector played on a PlayStation 5, which does not support modding, while the second author used a limited number of mods on the PC version. Modding involved altering the game and engaging with the community, examining Nexus Mods, and reviewing user posts to understand fans’ experiences of V.

In the “examine” phase, we moved between integration and incarnation. Initially, we determined how to communicate our method, data operations, and data representation in this publication (incarnation). We then focused on integration, applying our theoretical framework through a critical, phenomenological case study analysis. This synthesis drew on the multifaceted experiences and observations from the immersion and interaction stages, recorded in a field journal and screenshots. Data was selected based on its coding as the most significant regarding ethnographic epiphanies (Sinner 2021) and relevance to demonstrating nuance within the theoretical framework.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF V’S VIRTUAL AFTERLIFE

In *Cyberpunk 2077*, through the protagonist, V, the player experiences an existential crisis as the malfunctioning biochip stuck in the cybernetic implant in their brain causes the memories of iconic anti-establishment rocker Johnny Silverhand to override their sense of personal identity. V’s struggle for autonomy plays out differently in the five ‘official’ game endings, mostly ending

in V's death and uploading their memory to cyberspace. The concept of an afterlife is a central thematic element of the game, represented by Johnny Silverhand's possession of V and the in-game fictional bar, *The Afterlife*, where Night City mercenaries can mingle, unwind, delegate 'gigs', and become immortalised as 'legends' upon their death. Extending this theme, we contend that V is given a virtual afterlife outside of the game by its players via the extratextual poaching of fan productions. Following Carter's (2015) conceptualisation of paratexts, these curated images operate as paratextual artefacts that, by extending beyond the primary text, refract and reframe V's persona, underscoring how fan-driven aesthetics co-construct the NHOP.

Similar approaches have been applied to fan productivity of other media. Telotte (1991) described the slow growth of popularity towards certain texts as evidence of that text's 'second life' in his account of cult film, insisting that a cult text can be marked in its initial release phase by either appealing to a wide audience or struggling to find any audience. After the text's initial release, the potential second life begins in which the text '...seems to speak meaningfully (or *lovingly*) to a select group' (original emphasis, Telotte, 1991, 7). In this second life, the text is frequently paratextually transformed to accentuate the features beloved by fans, as is the case with V.

Similarly, *Cyberpunk 2077* experienced a tumultuous release, marked by technical issues and critical backlash that initially hindered its reception. Much like the cult films described by Telotte, the game has undergone a 'second life' facilitated by dedicated fans and developers' support. Since its initial release, a series of patches and updates, culminating in a massive upgrade and an expansion product in 2023, extended the game's lifespan and popularity, ensuring that V's online persona remains dynamic and continually updated. This process reflects Telotte's notion that the text, in this case the game, and the paratextual elements of V's NHOP heavily depend on extratextual processes of official and unofficial fan-driven practices that provide an "amorphous shape" to the game and persona, using a "set of industrial practices divorced" from the original text's conventions (1991, p. 8).

Through persona analysis, we observed that V's NHOP is an assemblage with independent and co-shaping components. These elements include, but are not limited to: (1) textual V, the in-game representation of V's character; (2) players, who individually shape V's character through embodied gameplay; (3) the persona of the *Cyberpunk 2077* video game; (4) official and unofficial paratextual media objects; (5) the performance of V by individuals through media and communication (streaming, cosplay, social media discourse); (6) the technological infrastructure enabling V's existence and player interaction; (7) the sociocultural context of V; (8) rules and regulations that govern in-game and real-world spaces; and (9) 'blackbox' elements (Bucher 2018) that are hidden but observable systems that influence interpretations of V's NHOP.

Capturing a NHOP's assemblage components in a non-exhaustive manner is difficult because the assemblage is emergent and never complete. However, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of elements related to fan contributions to V's NHOP assemblage. In the following, we examine V's complex NHOP assemblage by following the human and nonhuman actors that grant V a virtual afterlife. We frame the five dimensions of persona (Moore et al. 2017) as the key organising structure for analysing the selected data, focusing on the collective dimension. We incorporate concepts of becoming, the rhizome, representational and anti-representationalism, and paratextuality into our investigation of how fans contribute to V's NHOP assemblage through interaction with actors.

Publicness

Our investigation reveals that V’s persona exemplifies the negotiation between individual fan participation and collective NHOP formation, operating across a “spectrum of publicness” (Moore et al. 2017, p. 3) in ways that distinguish it from the fictional character. Unlike traditional online personas aligned with the “industrial model of the individual” (Marshall 2010, p. 44), V’s NHOP is not centralised on ‘official’ sites and platforms. Instead, its publicness is reified through a distributed network of actors—including individual fan personas, CD Projekt Red’s corporate persona, and the broader game persona of *Cyberpunk 2077*.

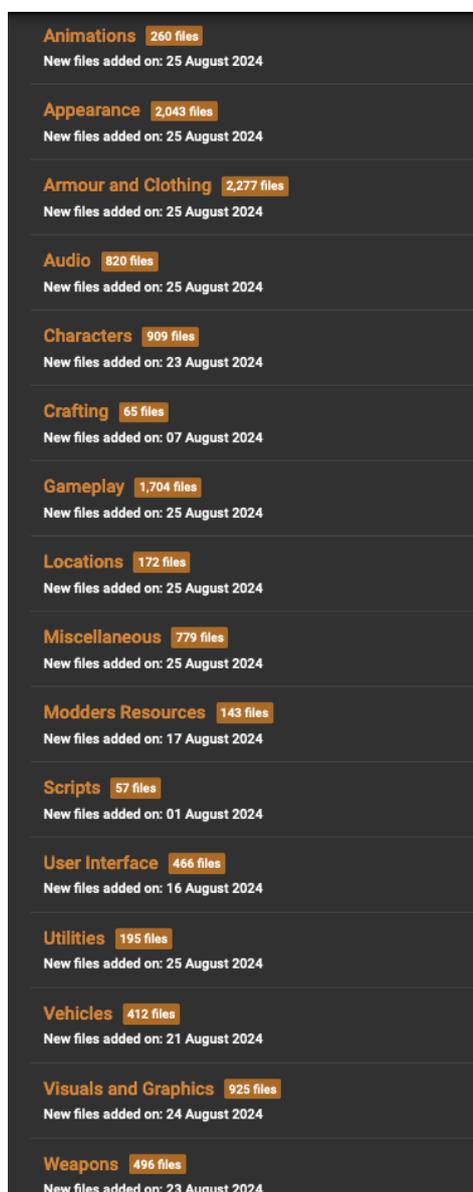


Figure 2: A list of *Cyberpunk 2077* game modifications on Nexus Mods, indicating how many mods per category. Captured on 26/08/24 by Connell.

Our study observed that V’s NHOP is made public by fans through multiple forms of extratextual engagement: virtual photography shared on platforms like Flickr, Reddit, and Discord; fanfiction published on Archive of Our Own; game modifications hosted on Nexus Mods; and interactive discourse across various online communities, from basic sharing to deeply involved philosophical discussions about V’s fate. Fans frequently contribute to V’s public persona by altering and sharing modifications to V’s appearance — such as new

hairstyles, eye colours, tattoos, body, and voice modifications. When these personalised versions are shared publicly, they become part of the collective performance of V's NHOP. Despite extensive customisation afforded in the vanilla game, appearance and clothing mods dominated Nexus Mods with 2043 and 2277 mods respectively (Figure 2.0), suggesting that modders prioritise altering V's appearance in forming V's NHOP.

Public extratextual engagements are integral to participatory culture, creating a virtual afterlife for V. Fan productions, whether converging or diverging from canonical material, reflect the negotiation between official narratives and fan interpretations inherent in textual poaching (Jenkins 1992, see also Mendes 2023, Zhang 2024). This tension distinguishes the fictional character from the NHOP through extratextual material. While CD Projekt Red facilitates V's publicness through official channels, fan-created mods blur the line between the canonical character and the publicly negotiated persona, creating a liminal V across both realms. The customisability of V amplifies the variety of approaches fans take in shaping V publicly. Figures 3.0 and 4.0 highlight how mods shift V's appearance, body and clothing, demonstrating what Taylor's (2018) describes as the shifting power relations in digital gaming cultures where players visually 'talk back' to the industry's framing of V, asserting agency within the negotiated online spaces of persona production.



Figure 3: A 'vanilla' V, depicted through Virtual Photography, using vanilla photomode pose 'down with gravity' (image: Connell).



Figure 4: A modded V depicted through Virtual Photography, using vanilla photomode pose 'Night City strut' (image: provided to Connell by participant).

In self-publishing modified versions of V, fans also construct their personal fan personas. Understanding fan engagement in this way helps comprehend “...the transformations of the relations between public and private and shed light on their new interconnections” (Moore 2020, p. 9). Fans share otherwise private game experiences, transforming personal gameplay into public performances of individual networked identity that simultaneously becomes a node in the distributed actor-network constituting V's NHOP. Any unshared content remains private and separate from this collective NHOP. Whether aligned with the canonical "vanilla" V or reimagined through modifications, each shared iteration of V demonstrates how the public nature of fan participation is crucial in shaping collective perceptions of V's character beyond the game's diegetic boundaries.

Mediatisation

The mediatisation of V's persona occurs through the assemblage of technologies, platforms, and fan practices that extend V's existence beyond the game text, effectively creating a second, or afterlife. V is a valuable example of how personas are mediatised assemblages of original, remixed, and appropriated digital content, enhanced and produced with filters, emojis, memes, and photo manipulation. These practices align with Jenkins' (2009) participatory culture literacies, where fans are required to possess sophisticated digital skills to create and share content (see also Jenkins and Jie 2024; Hagge 2023). This mediatised performance of V operates within the constraints and affordances of platforms, technologies, and cultural contexts. The terms of service, algorithmic censorship and recommendation, and other human and nonhuman moderators dictate the visibility and regulation of an online persona (Marshall et al. 2020). Sub-Reddits, such as r/cyberpunkgame, have community rules that fans must follow when engaging on the channel. Fans also follow unwritten rules for fan engagement, which is evident in cultural norms, such as fandom language, where cyberpunk-specific slang is used in mod descriptions and Reddit posts. Affect is naturalised through likes, shares, and comments, which reinforce social bonds and communal validation: ‘... defining [fan] community through shared emotions’ (Busse, 2018, p. 209).

As fans produce mediatisations of V and share them, they constitute their fan personas (Moore 2020). An illustrative example is the Virtual Sightseers Discord server, where users engage in practices that mediatise V's NHOP while simultaneously cultivating their gamer personas. Users must 'level up' through interactions, such as posting messages, reacting to others' content, and sharing images to unlock access to certain channels, such as the photomode contests. This 'gamified' (Woodcock & Johnson 2018) system incentivises participation and further media production. Collective knowledge is fostered through 'Q&A' and tutorial channels, and V's NHOP is continuously mediatised as users post images, share modifications, and discuss interpretations of the characters.

The mediatisation of V's persona encompasses a temporally-based persona experience beyond the material, virtual, and informational aspects that Marshall et al. (2020) identified. While V's NHOP does exist across individual devices and consoles, public networks, and cloud infrastructures, temporal aspects are also significant due to V's iterative representations through game updates and patches, and paratextual trailers, and fanfiction. More indirectly, paratextual materials like the original *Cyberpunk* role-playing game, and the *Edgerunners* (2023) Netflix TV series based on the game, also inform V's persona. These paratextual materials provide the world V is a product of, the characters V forms relationships with, and extratextual materials for fan fiction writers to develop V's NHOP with through crossover narratives. Notably, fans had begun creating V's NHOP before the official game release, as they created fanfiction content on Archive of Our Own based on minimal details from early promotional materials, subverting the traditional ancillary model of paratexts. This pre-release fan engagement demonstrates how the NHOP develops non-linearly, with fans acting as key contributors. V's NHOP exists beyond the boundaries of the game as it is mediatised by a large community with various entry points for co-creation. They exist in infinite possible versions through diverse means of mediatisation, where their boundaries are fluid and resist rigid categorisation, highlighting a complex assemblage of technologies and practices that facilitate mediatised NHOP identities.

Performance

The performative dimension of V's NHOP emerges from the interplay between the representational adherence to the game's narrative and anti-representational creativity afforded by fan agency. Performance is inherent to the concept of an online persona, signifying orchestrated public presentations of a 'self' (Marshall et al., 2020). Moore et al. (2017) assert that publicly mediated personas require performances of identity through activities such as commenting, liking, and posting. In the context of V's persona, this performance is an amalgamation of staged public instances intended for consumption and interaction by others. While traditional understandings of persona, rooted in Jungian theories, rely on a 'real' self behind the mask, NHOPs like V complicate this notion. Without an actual self to perform, V's persona, like that of a brand, a place, or artificial intelligence, is entirely co-produced through the collective interactions of various human and nonhuman actors.

V's malleability offers agency to players to perform their sense of identity and uniqueness, in tandem with other 'meta-stages' (Milik 2017) through the transgressive mechanisms of the game text (Aarseth 2014). In-game, players enact representational performances by customising V's appearance, making gender and sexuality-based choices, pursuing relationships, and selecting dialogue choices and lifepaths (Chess, 2017). Figure 5.0 highlights V's gendered appearance as an important performative element, where fans renegotiate V's gender identities through vanilla and modded gameplay and sharing. We encountered many instances of virtual photography as extension of gameplay that used mods to

actively reshape the designated gender identities of V to confront the normative frameworks presented in the base game. These distinctly ergodic activities (Aarseth 1997) combine player function with fan interpretive labour to produce new variations of V's NHOP, broadening the spectrum of gender performance.



Figure 5: A screenshot of V's customisation option between body types (image: Connell).

Fans exercise anti-representational agency by reimagining V in ways that deliberately distort, break, or challenge the original design from minor appearance mods to mods that make V fly, move through walls, and otherwise break the internal logic of the game's rules (See Figure 6.0). Following Consalvo's (2007) analysis of how players challenge normative constraints, the images selected here depict these transgressive interventions, visually evidencing the interpretive freedoms and renegotiation of legitimate play that shape V's non-static persona.



Figure 6: Image of a 'glitched' out V following the use of mods that 'broke' the game causing V to fly above Nightcity. (image: Connell)

Virtual photography allows fans to enact V's performance through interaction (Milik 2017), with standard photomode poses representing vanilla V while mods enable customisation beyond *Cyberpunk 2077's* textual boundaries, making vanilla poses crucial for identifying V in rhizomatic fan productions. Unlike other games' photomodes that suspend in-action gameplay

(Connell 2024), *Cyberpunk 2077* defaults to a neutral 'tabula rasa' pose, ensuring V is always posed. Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate two other vanilla poses, 'roundhouse shot to the face' and 'don't even' respectively (Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty Walkthrough Team, 2023). The posed photomode system affects how players capture and represent V, as fans operate within the bounds and capabilities of their gaming system, demonstrating a technological element of V's NHOP performance. Some poses offer intertextual references, like 'V is the One' nodding to Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* (2000), demonstrating photomode's role as a nonhuman actor intercommunicating with other actors in V's NHOP assemblage. However, fans might use mods that create non-standard poses making V unrecognisable, and then mediatise that V as part of V's persona.



Figure 7: A screenshot of fan Virtual Photography of V, demonstrating the vanilla photomode pose 'roundhouse shot to the face'.



Figure 8: A screenshot of fan Virtual Photography of V pictured on the left, using vanilla photomode pose 'don't even' and in-game character, Jackie, pictured on the right. Image by Lt Columbo on r/Cyberpunkgame

Cultural norms within fan communities significantly influence the performative aspects of V's persona. These norms manifest through platform-specific practices, linguistic codes, and the valuing of technical skills, all of which contribute to the collective construction of V's NHOP. For instance, the prevalence of fem/V in fan productions (see Whelan 2020), noted on Nexus Mods, reflects cultural trends and fan preferences that differ from the game's more gender-neutral marketing. Alternatively, platform-specific tagging systems, like those on Archive of Our Own (AO3) help to categorise and signal content, facilitating navigation and choice and foster community cohesion.

Fan fiction further points to the performative duality of V's NHOP. Works on AO3 often explore non-canonical relationships through 'shipping' - the fan creation of texts featuring their own favoured romantic couplings between characters, demonstrating affective investment in V's persona (Busse, 2018). Wanzo (2015) and Pande (2020) have conducted important research exposing the inherent framework of whiteness through which fan studies have been conducted and understood, leading to blind spots regarding race and representation. This is clear in the way fan productions frequently default to portrayals of V that adhere to white, heteronormative conventions. The fan-driven pairing of characters in romantic relationships, such as the most prevalent pairing of V and Johnny Silverhand on AO3 (1,530 tags out of 5,531 works), demonstrate how fans navigate both representational adherence to the game narrative and the anti-representational creativity afforded by fan agency, which helps to achieve V's multiplicity of identities, each both a little reflective of V and the fan's interpretation and embodiment. Thus, V's NHOP becomes rhizomatic as it is nonlinear and non-hierarchical, expanding in as many directions as fans can contribute.

The Collective

V's persona emerges as a dynamic and rhizomatic assemblage shaped by mutual relational interactions among fans and the paratextual materials they create, producing a constant state of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The extensive fan productions on platforms like AO3 exemplify this, as individuals satisfy individual desires outside the game and become integral components to V's afterlife as an NHOP. For example, the primary researcher used pre-release fanfiction to create a new V character that matches the fanfic's description. They then visited virtual locations mentioned in the fanfic to create imagery for the scenes described, using virtual photography, and publishing these to the Virtual Sightseers Discord channel with an explanation of its origin. Figures 9 and 10 demonstrate how the primary researcher captured the fan fic's description of V with [a leather jacket, flashing teeth, and dark hair] in the specific scene location. Not only does this illustrate the sophisticated, unexpected, and highly participatory nature of online fan engagement, it also demonstrates the decentralised collective role and affective community investment of fans. In this case, the collective constitution of V's NHOP involved the original fanfic creator and the researcher rhizomatically publishing paratextual V-related objects, highlighting the nonlinear temporal development of V's NHOP. Figure 10 particularly emphasises how players manipulate V's bodily attributes, attire and characterisations to contest, reimagine and expand gendered possibilities in the game's original design (Bergstrom 2019). These textual and visual digital artefacts reconfigure boundaries of masculinity, femininity and androgyny through fan-curated paratextual creativity. Fan fiction and virtual photography demonstrates, in this case, Bergstrom's emphasis on the intersection of identity, play and community, which collectively produces V's persona.



Figure 9: A visual representation of V as described in a pre-game-release fanfiction (image: Connell)



Figure 10: A visual representation of a V-related scene as described in a pre-game-release fanfiction (image: Connell)

In Actor-Network terms, V's NHOP gathers actors from diverse ontologies, times, and spaces. Nonhumans, like V, modify relations between actors: when humans create collectives around V, the NHOP acquires the competencies from the broader connections of the network, such as cultural significance and narrative potential, but it also demands specific competencies from the actors aligned with it, such as technological literacy and creativity. The reciprocal structure of the network is not always even, but it always alters the collective through even the smallest contribution to V's persona. For example, collective fan creations often involve metatextuality through discussions on Reddit, where the dialogue choices of the players and their motivations are analysed in depth.

Marshall (2015) emphasises how intercommunication means that social media structures, networked relationships, and the constant sharing and resharing of media shape online personas. In the context of V's persona, fans form networks of interaction that coalesce collectively into assemblages differently to human personas, which are still networked but

ultimately curated and embodied by individuals. A NHOP exists solely through its digital presence and paratextuality. The rhizomatic nature of V's persona means it is not confined to a single interpretation or representation. The assemblage is heterogeneous and expanding, with fans constantly introducing new elements. For instance, modders display a desire to incorporate intertextual material in-game through popular mods that make *Edgerunners* weapons and clothing available or alter the player character's voice performance (generally to recognisable celebrity voices). These mods showcase the altering capabilities of intercommunicative acts, where modded content connects the game to other media texts and public figures, generating new possibilities for V's persona that expand the assemblage.

Value, Agency, Reputation and Prestige

The value dimension of online persona encompasses value, agency, reputation, and prestige (VARP) to assess how personas demonstrate significance and importance to their owners and micropublics (Marshall et al. 2020). In the content of V's persona, value is inextricably linked with the participatory cultures of fans and the commercial interests of the game's developers, as well as third-party investors such as Netflix, producers of game-related merchandise, and the original writer and consultant on the game, Mike Pondsmith. V's NHOP holds significant commercial value for CD Project Red, serving as an extension of the fictional character that inspires extensive fan engagement and free marketing (Švelch, 2021). The modding community's contributions add value to the in-game experience, contributing unpaid labour that enhances the game's appeal and longevity - echoing long-term debates within fan studies regarding the ethical implications of fan production.

Jones (2014, n.p.) has argued in relation to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (which began as *Twilight* fan fiction), that tension exists between fan production as part of the "fannish gift economy" —given freely and "designed to create and cement its social structure"—in opposition to those looking to "exploit fandom". Like most fan productions, modding exists within a commodified participation environment, where user-generated content serves the interests of developers. As Jenkins et al. (2016) described, 'commercial culture' is attuned to the commodification of intercommunication, and operates in a digital ecosystem in which all user data is treated as transactional. Meanwhile, De Kosnik et. al's (2015) study has added further nuance to the analysis of fan productivity by accounting for both the rate of fan productivity, in addition to fan preferences for specific platforms as they relate to feelings of connection and fan community; although not a focus, these tendencies are also evident in our case study. The "Rate My V" threads on Reddit and CD Projekt Red's forums and the sharing of custom V designs contribute to the reputation of V and the game. More than 5,530 works of fanfiction on AO3 indicate substantial affective value showcasing investment in the co-production of V's NHOP, illustrating how fan productions in our case "... intensify certain textual experiences, less working against the industry's version of the text than cutting a personalised path through it" (Gray, 2010, p. 20). Virtual photography shared via Flickr, Discord and Reddit, further exemplify the way fan labour adds attentional value to V's persona, as fans capture personalised portrayals of V, contributing to the persona's visibility and appeal. This makes V's death intriguing, as fan investment with V's character and V's commercial value did not cease with the fictional death of the character. Thus, fans provide an afterlife for V through the NHOP that demonstrates the affixation of continuing value to V's NHOP that is not necessarily attached to the living status of the fictional character; rather, the NHOP transcends the fictional.

While fans may gain prestige for their personal personas within the communities for which they produce content, and the developers benefit from fan labour, can it be said that V's NHOP also benefits and accrues value or prestige to itself as a nonhuman assemblage? Is the

rhizomatic nature of the NHOP actually resistant to the material benefits of reputation, as its agency is not directed by a self, but rather enacted by its micropublic? Drawing on Actor-Network theory, we can recognise that agency is not limited to human actors, and nonhumans like V can exercise agency by making a difference in the actions of other agents and actors (Latour, 2005). V's NHOP effectively influences fan practices, developer strategies, and paratextual formations, contributing the game's overall cultural impact. The agency exercised by all the actors contributes to the reputation and prestige of the game, its character, and the paratextual assemblage of V's persona.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the concept of nonhuman online personas (NHOPs) through a detailed case study of V, the player character from the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*. By applying a novel methodological approach called persona analysis, we have extended the scope of persona studies to include nonhuman entities that are co-created and continuously reshaped by a network of human and nonhuman actors, emphasising multiplicity, connectivity, and fluidity. Our investigation demonstrates that NHOPs emerge as complex, rhizomatic assemblages formed through the participatory practices of others, in this case, fans, game developers, and the technological affordances of online platforms.

By applying the five dimensions of persona, we have shown how V's persona is a dynamic and emergent entity. Central to our analysis has been the collective dimension, as V's NHOP can be fundamentally understood as a product of mutual, relational interactions amongst fans and the paratextuality they produce. Our study underscores the importance of recognising NHOPs as significant components of digital culture that challenge traditional notions of identity centred on human agency and psychological notions of selfhood. This research extends persona studies to encompass nonhuman entities and opens new avenues for understanding the role of fan practices in co-creating online personas: how online personas are collectively constructed, mediated, performed, and valued.

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