

FOCUS

# Nina Davies

## Dancing in the Uncanny Valley

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They stood at their bedroom window, at the fifth floor, gossamer curtains slightly obscuring their faces as they watched in utter perplexity. Another couple, opposite to them, phones in hands, observing the scene unfolding below. Three non-player characters roamed the gated courtyard in unison, their glitched gestures borrowed from *Grand Theft Auto* via Tik Tok via the Middle Ages asynchronous to each other. Sometimes waving, sometimes jumping, sometimes silently calling into the distance, the NPCs seemed comparatively more at home here in the hyper-developed, CGI-cosplaying housing estate than in the audience.

This is what they call the uncanny valley<sup>1</sup>, and it's a phenomenon Nina Davies plays on in her site-specific performance work for *Precursing* at Matt's Gallery in London.

Although originally related to animation and robotics, where peoples' ability to relate to humanoid characters suddenly drops as they enter the realm of being hyper-real, the uncanny valley has since been related to feeling "creeped out" more generally. The phenomenon can also be described as an eerie or unsettling feeling experienced in response to something not-quite-human but eerily convincing. It's similar to the *unheimlich* - not familiar - or Mark Fisher's framework for the *weird* - the presence of that which does not belong. But what makes an encounter with real-life NPCs unsettling when their origins are from somewhere profoundly digital and familiar? Perhaps encountering an NPC in "real" life blurs the concepts of authenticity and truth, rejects our comprehension of bodies in the world, or encourages the idea of the singularity, that one day technological intelligence will supersede that of humans. Perhaps it's also a flip of the uncanny valley; where hyper-real humans act robot-like instead of vice-versa.

To understand the use of NPCs in Nina's work, it's important to foreground this evolving TikTok trend within the context of its history, and to draw upon Nina's former works.

Discussing the misappropriation of traditional and social dances in virtual spaces, *Express Yourself on the Battlefield* (2020), explores the paradoxical relationship between the commodification and sale of dances in game spaces like Fortnite and the lack of ownership or compensation the dancers receive for their creations. As an illustration of how permeable dance cultures relate to technological development, *Bionic Step* (2022) introduces the theory of 'Techno-Faith', and how spirituality or rituals confront our new belief systems of technological progress. *Glitch Guising* (2022), on the other hand, foretells a not-too-distant future of resistance towards the surveillance of human movement resulting in a new shared language between technical devices and workers.

"The funny thing about games and fictions is that they have a weird way of bleeding into reality"<sup>2</sup>, notes Erik Davis in *Techgnosis*. The human experience is rich with narratives, rituals, and roles that structure psychological understanding, social dynamics, and our perception of the material universe. The world, then, is "in many ways a web-work of fictions, or, better yet, of stories"<sup>3</sup>. The modern trend to "gamify" our social and technological engagements merely extends the longstanding traditions of subcultures, folklore, and belief systems. To Nina, fictional dances and storytelling of origin and placement in the non-fictional makes a lot of sense especially when juxtaposed with ritual, technology and belief systems.



*Precursing*, 2023. Installation detail. Photographed by Jonathan Bassett. Courtesy the Artist and Matt's Gallery London.

*Precursing*, 2023. Performance still. Photographed by Jonathan Bassett. Courtesy the Artist and Matt's Gallery London.





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NPC culture refers to a concept derived from internet culture and gaming communities<sup>4</sup>. The term “NPC” refers to characters within video games that are controlled by the game rather than by human players. Non-player characters, in gaming communities, generally only serve to give the idea that the universe in which the player is moving is populated. Much like the “fog of war” phenomenon - in which a map of a game is revealed to you and then obscured by “fog” - or the “frustum culling” method - where any geometry that isn’t inside the visible area is discarded to reduce the computer’s workload - NPCs operate within a space that is generally not considered playable.

The NPC dates back to as early as the 1980’s.

As video games became more complex, so too did their features. One of the earliest examples of an NPC are the ghosts in PacMan who appeared in the 1980’s arcade game. Although this character wasn’t playable, the intention for the player was to destroy the ghosts before they destroyed you: here the NPC is less about populating a world, and more about creating tasks for the player. Later examples, more akin to the NPC trend on TikTok, include Role-Playing-Games like *Skyrim* which often have a multitude of NPCs that populate the world but also allow players to interact with, for instance, quest-givers, merchants, companions, and adversaries.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of internet culture, the term NPC gained prominence in 2016 alongside the emergence of NPC Wojak, a crudely drawn version of the original Wojak (known as the ‘Feels Guy’ meme) featuring a pointed nose and vacant expression. Originating from Reddit and 4chan communities,



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it initially served as a derogatory label for individuals perceived as lacking independent thought. Quickly embraced by right-wing circles, it became part of a mass-trolling campaign targeting ‘snowflake’ liberals, suggesting that leftist ideologies were akin to scripted characters in a video game, responding with buzzwords to Donald Trump’s policies. Despite its evolution from its original context, NPC Wojak still embodies the notion of conformism and unthinking behaviour.

The NPC trend on TikTok diverges from its Wojak origins, focusing more on creating a simulated reality. With a societal shift away from narcissistic *Main Character Syndrome* towards a more understated existence, the concept of ‘side character energy’ emerges to reflect a desire to live less prominently and reduce the pressure of constant spotlight. NPCs resonate with our post-ironic sensibility, where humorously acknowledging our automaton-like behaviour seems preferable to grappling with the increasingly surreal aspects of modern life.<sup>6</sup>

To Nina, the NPC is not unlike any other performer; they enact a series of choreographed movements and gestures in a given space within a given timeframe. However, the NPC performer enacts what Alan Lomax called ‘choreometrics’ in his 1974 film *Dance & Human History*; a record system for observing cultural patterns and expressive behaviour through dance and movement styles across cultures. In the film, Lomax shows similarities of the individuals’ movement patterns to their work routines and the tools they employ in their tasks.



*Precursing*, 2023. Video still. Photographed by Jonathan Bassett. Courtesy the Artist and Matt's Gallery London.



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The NPC as performer is then recreating known gestures of our digitally dominant world of culture and labour. There are also links to an online transmission of ‘mass sociogenic illness’ in Nina’s works. Seen in her references to the 1518 ‘dancing plagues’, as well as the mass adoption of NPC dances on TikTok, this new type of sociogenic illness<sup>7</sup> not only drives a group hysteria but also provides fertile ground for new ones to emerge. The speed and complexity with which trends and knowledge circulate on the web increases this further, as seen with visitors and passersby to Nina’s show at Matt’s filming the spectacle of seeing an NPC in real life, and uploading it to TikTok in a never-ending loop of content and evidence.

As much as Nina’s work might question the roles of the body in space, be that in meatspace or virtual space, it also hints at the use of computer vision, and how machines see us. Through the fictionalised - although somewhat based on real events - histories woven into Nina’s practice, we begin to see how the body reforms itself to communicate with computer vision. In her book *Unthought*<sup>8</sup>, the postmodern literary critic Katherine Hayles unveils the intricate interplay between humans and machines, challenging conventional notions of consciousness and agency. Through a nuanced examination of cognitive processes, embodiment, and artificial intelligence, Hayles invites confrontation of how we are becoming computational, urging us to navigate the evolving landscape of the digital age with critical awareness and ethical discernment. In some ways, Nina’s work repeats

this need of criticality in a world of passive consumption and mimicry. As one reddit comment on a post about the NPC TikTok trend, “this particular expression of the human-algorithm-human feedback loop is...seemingly somewhat innocent. But I think there’s something much darker going on we need to be really careful about: we are absolutely letting machines influence what we think is important, real, valuable, and this is really dangerous”.

1 The phenomenon was first coined and described by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in an article published in 1970. Mori identified the phenomenon as “bukimi no tani genshō”, meaning ‘valley of eeriness.’

2 Davis, E. (2015) *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information*, p.375

3 Ibid, p. 375

4 Although it could also be said to link to Dolores Cannon’s ‘backdrop people’, as seen in her novel *The Convoluted Universe: Book 4*, from 2011. Though more related to the simulation theory, backdrop people serve to fill the background of our lives.

5 NPCs are also seen in Open World Games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* released in 2004 and *Red Dead Redemption*, contributing to the game’s atmosphere and providing dynamic interactions. We see them across Simulation Games like *The Sims* and *Stardew Valley*, as well as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games like *World Of Warcraft*.

6 Following a new trend called “NPC streaming,” creators on TikTok emulate robotic behaviours and utter odd phrases during live streams, attracting thousands of dollars in online tips from fans. Leading this trend is Fedha Sinon, known as ‘Pinkydoll’, a creator from Montreal. Sinon gained fame for her TikTok streams where she repeatedly says “ice-cream” in a voice described as “sexy baby”. Fans send payments that result in icons flashing on the screen, with Sinon responding to each one with a catchphrase. The result is a continuous stream of robotic yet vaguely erotic gibberish delivered in a jerky manner.

7 Shmerling, R.H., MD (2022) Tics and TikTok: Can social media trigger illness? <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/tics-and-tiktok-can-social-media-trigger-illness-202201182670>.

8 Hayles, N.K. (2017) *Unthought*.