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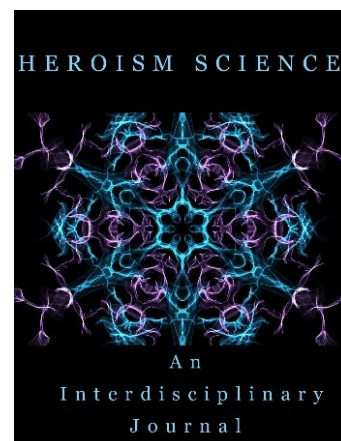
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Shaping Heroism Through Participatory Fan Cultures: An Analysis of Video Game Heroes as Nonhuman Online Personas

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ABSTRACT: This paper expands the theoretical framework for analysing nonhuman personas developed by Connell and Moore (2023) to explore video game hero personas as assemblages - complex negotiations between social media platforms, video game developers, and participatory fan cultures. Through a critical analysis of Aloy from the Horizon (2017-2023) series, I argue that video game heroes are dynamic characters, and fan participation in the shaping of a video game hero's online persona is often overlooked. By examining the collaborative relationships between video game heroes and their online participatory fan communities, the article contributes to ongoing conversations about processes of heroic representation in popular culture.

KEYWORDS: *Heroism, Video Game Heroes, Participatory Culture, Persona Studies, Nonhuman, Horizon, Gender, Fandom, Game Studies, Aloy*

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the collaborative relationships between video game heroes and their online fan communities. Through an investigation of Aloy from the action role-playing Horizon series (Guerrilla Games, 2017a, 2017b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b), this article argues that video game heroes are dynamic characters, and that fan participation in the shaping of a video game hero's online persona is often overlooked. I utilise a case study of video game character, Aloy, and how her nonhuman online persona (NHOP) is reinterpreted by fans using virtual photography. In the virtual photography of digital role-playing games (RPGs), video game characters are more than protagonists moulded by players' decisions and customisations. They extend into the participatory culture of online fan communities, occupying the liminal space between fictional character and online persona, text and paratext. Video game characters illustrate how NHOP is an intricate assemblage (collection) of digital artefacts, with fans actively shaping an online persona for the game character through screenshots, live streams, memes, and videos. Thus, the examination of Aloy's NHOP highlights the interplay of intertextual, intercommunicative and paratextual elements evident in collective fan explorations of Aloy's heroism in virtual photography.

Through textual analysis and auto-netnography, I focus on the participatory culture of the Horizon fandom and the queering of Aloy, highlighted by an optional sapphic kiss with a major character, Seyka, in the Horizon Forbidden West (HFW) DLC Burning Shores (BS) (Guerrilla Games, 2023b). I explore the nuances of Aloy's gender and sexuality representation in-game and through fan virtual photography. The queering of Aloy illuminates the transformative engagement of fans who actively participate in remixing narratives and canonical traits of fictional characters through virtual photography. These online practices generate digital artefacts that act as paratexts to the canonical video texts, creating intertextual representations of Aloy's character. These representations contribute to

the collective assemblage of an online persona for Aloy, co-curatively shaped by a network of actors, both human and nonhuman, through digital communication. Thus, I showcase the digital literacies involved in the fan labour associated with producing video game screenshots, an emerging area of media research.

A combination of analytical lenses is employed to create a theoretical framework for examining NHOPs, an emerging communication phenomenon that has not yet been extensively studied. Here, the culture of remixing media and fan production within fan studies bridges a gap in persona studies literature, regarding how micropublics - or audiences - contribute to an online persona's assemblage. This ties into an aspect of persona studies seldom explored: the collective dimension of online persona, which is critical in understanding how a nonhuman entity can have an online persona. This article explores video game characters as NHOPs, a complex instance where agency is not individual but stems from a networked assemblage of human and nonhuman actors contributing to a video game character's heroic representation online.

Popular culture has long been recognised as a vital tool for comprehending heroes in the real world. Representing diverse heroes in games is of paramount importance, and fandom, an everyday practice, plays a significant role in shaping these heroic representations. Thus, this article scrutinises the audience's role in co-curating Aloy's NHOP, aiming to answer the question: What role did fans play in the queering of Aloy's NHOP in the HFW DLC BS via virtual photography?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CONCEPTUALISING THE NONHUMAN ONLINE PERSONA

An online persona is a “performance and assemblage of the individual public self” (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 17), a term originally linked to the Ancient Greek practice of actors donning ‘prosopon’ masks, and now influenced by psychoanalytic (Jung, 1983) and social role (Goffman, 1959) theories. However, due to the shift towards a presentational paradigm (Johnston, 2020; Marshall, 2010; Moore, 2019), persona is no longer just a social role, but an everyday, robust media practice, where individuals engage in online identity formation. Emerging persona studies research investigates nonhuman entities such as animals, inanimate objects, and AI (see: Barbour & Humphrey, 2023; Boucaut, 2021; Dion & Arnould, 2016; Frawley & Dyson, 2014; Giles, 2013, 2020; Henderson, 2014; Holland, 2021; Tomitsch et al., 2021; Woods, 2018). The concept of NHOP represents a burgeoning area of inquiry, especially with the rise of nonhuman content creators and machine learning advancements. NHOPs refer to nonhuman entities capable of public self-presentation online, encompassing a diverse range of entities from animals and robots to virtual influencers and artificial intelligence.

NHOP is understood through the same five dimensions as human online personas: publicness, mediatisation, performativity, collectivity, and value (Marshall et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2017). These dimensions reflect the public exposure, technological mediation, orchestrated performances, collective interactions, and value assessment of an online persona. The collective dimension, representing the integration of personas into public collectives, is especially critical in understanding the role of ‘micropublics’ in assembling a NHOP (Barbour et al., 2014; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Marshall, 2014, 2015). Micropublics are networks of interrelated users, at the heart of which, a persona broadcasts content. This article adapts

Marshall's (2010) concept of 'official sites' - official online platforms where celebrities perform their public selves and maintain their cultural commodity value (Moore & Barbour, 2016) - to consider official or unofficial texts and paratexts that contribute to Aloy's NHOP. 'Unofficial sites' is a term I propose to encompass micropublic-created paratexts such as fan productions, in opposition to the 'official sites' described above.

Intertextuality, a concept explored by Berger (2020) and Fairclough (2003), is also crucial in understanding NHOPs. It refers to the relationship between texts and how they borrow from one another, often unconsciously. Intertextuality is selective, incorporating certain texts and voices while excluding others. In the context of Aloy's NHOP, virtual photography depicting the video game character and events demonstrates high degrees of intertextuality. Additionally, intercommunication is integral to understanding NHOP formation. Introduced by Marshall (2015), intercommunication describes a new age of media and personal communication, facilitated by online social networks. This framework, involving multiple modes of communication and connectivity structures, is valuable in analysing NHOPs as collective assemblages reliant on various communication modes and internet connectivity.

Paratextuality is also inherent to NHOP assemblages. Building on Consalvo's (2007) concept of gaming as a paratextual industry, Švelch (2020) highlights Jones' (2008) assertion that in video games, the sheer volume of paratextual elements challenges the primacy of the 'original' text. In NHOP assemblages, paratexts are considered for their intertextual and intercommunicative connections, rather than the ancillary relations to a 'self', as implied in Genette & Maclean's (1991) original conception. This applies to character NHOPs like Aloy, whose paratextuality extends to all character-related productions "regardless of their origin and cultural status" (Švelch 2020, 'The Future of the Paratextual Framework' para. 3). Virtual photography, as one of many paratextual elements of Aloy's heroic NHOP,

demonstrates how these kinds of online persona depart from “subordination of paratextual elements” (Švelch 2020, ‘The Future of the Paratextual Framework’ para. 4). Instead, paratextuality in NHOP assemblages highlights the sociocultural context that assemblage components carry, examined in this study through the lens of Aloy's heroic, gender and sexuality representation.

2.2 VIDEO GAME HEROISM

In the landscape of video games, the concept of heroism, with its roots in Greek mythology, is ever evolving, challenging traditional binary archetypes like good versus evil and exceptional versus ordinary (Cisneros, 2014; Goethals & Allison, 2012; López Gregoris & Macías Villalobos, 2020). As highlighted by Connell and Comerford (2023), video gaming is not just entertainment but a pivotal field in media studies, offering a rich platform for interpreting and enacting forms of heroism, both real and virtual. The range from focused linearity to open narratives in games provides various avenues to analyse heroism, where player agency and embodiment are central to experiencing the hero's journey (Gee, 2008; Milik, 2017).

The concept of embodiment in gaming, as argued by Connell and Comerford (2023), is where the player's union with their character blurs the lines between the player's intentions and the character's role, be it game-imposed or player-fashioned. This experiential dynamic forces the player to understand the hero's journey firsthand, redefining the hero with a focus on unpredictable stories and fluid characters, and the invitation for everyday individuals to become heroes, independent of birth or divine descent (López Gregoris & Macías Villalobos, 2020). Hence, the emotional journey in video games is integral, with the player experiencing a "double consciousness" through their avatar, merging the hero's narrative journey with their own emotional experience during gameplay (Tu et al., 2022, p. 1). This immersive role-

playing allows players to engage with the game's moral universe and assume the responsibilities of a classical hero (Bowman, 2018; Yee, 2019 as cited in Tu et al., 2022;).

While player embodiment has been explored through in-game experiences, this article considers how fans extend embodiment beyond the game through virtual photography. Thus, I examine audiences' alignment or divergence from the moral codes and behaviours of Aloy's character through virtual photography. The analysis reveals insights into the collective dimension of Aloy's NHOP and its fan contributions, utilising Goethals and Allison's Great Eight traits of heroism (2012; Figure 1) and gender representation as analytical frameworks.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Caring | compassionate, empathetic, kind |
| Charismatic | dedicated, eloquent, passionate |
| Inspiring | admirable, amazing, great, inspirational |
| Reliable | loyal, true |
| Resilient | accomplished, determined, persevering |
| Selfless | altruistic, honest, humble, moral |
| Smart | intelligent, wise |
| Strong | courageous, dominating, gallant, leader |

Figure 1: The Great Eight Traits of Heroism, outlined by Goethals & Allison (2012, p. 194) and Allison & Goethals (2010, p. 62).

The examination of female characters like Aloy is essential to understand the representation and impact of gender on gameplay. Game studies literature addresses the inherent masculinity of the archetypal hero, the distinction between male and female heroes, and issues of hyper-sexualisation and the scarcity of quality female heroes in games (Cisneros, 2014; Labre & Duke, 2004; McHenry, 2021). Emerging literature on the diversity of race, gender identities, and sexualities in video game heroes highlights the need to investigate the audience's role in shaping representations through user-generated content

(Connell & Comerford, 2023). I contribute to this area of research by exploring Aloy's gender representation, acknowledged as exemplary in female video game character portrayal (Owens, 2022), and highlighting the audience's role in crafting representations of her NHOP.

2.3 PARTICIPATORY MEDIA CULTURES

The interdisciplinary field of fan studies places the role of fans in co-curating NHOP assemblages as central, particularly in participatory online communities. This article combines fan studies and persona studies to explore the collective dimension of persona assemblage, drawing on Moore's (2020) work on individuals' negotiation of online identities, and Jenkins' theories of participatory media cultures (1992, 2006, 2009; and Jenkins et al., 2016).

Moore (2020) focuses on fan presentation online, highlighting individual agency and collective aspects of fan identity, as well as interactions with both human and nonhuman actors in digital networks. Online fan personas are a public performance of individuality projected towards a collective (fandom), using digital objects that function as paratexts to form a virtual identity. Intercommunication, where digital objects move between different communication domains, also shapes the public presentation of fan personas and contributes to collective fan identity.

Building on Genette and Maclean's (1991) conceptual framework of 'paratext', I argue that NHOP constitutes a new kind of emergent text, co-curated through the interplay between curator dissemination and textual poaching by fans. Textual poaching is described by Jenkins (1992) as active fan interaction with media texts, where elements like themes, characters, and plotlines are repurposed to align with their cultural interests. This resonates with the curation of NHOPs, where fans appropriate and remix media artefacts related to fictional characters, actively engaging in co-curation.

Jenkins' works (1992, 2006, 2009; and Jenkins et al., 2016) serve as a foundational framework for this study, which describe participatory cultures characterised by active engagement, community-based sharing, and remixing of media texts. His digital literacies (Jenkins 2009) demonstrate applications of his work on textual poaching to school education, as shown in Figure 2. The literacies are useful when applied to virtual photography, as they enable players to effectively navigate, understand and manipulate gaming and social media worlds.

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Play | The capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving. |
| Performance | The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. |
| Simulation | The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. |
| Appropriation | The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. |
| Multitasking | The ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details. |
| Distributed Cognition | The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities. |
| Collective Intelligence | The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal. |
| Judgement | The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources. |
| Transmedia Navigation | The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities. |
| Networking | The ability to search for, synthesise, and disseminate information. |
| Negotiation | The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. |

Figure 2: The new literacies of participatory culture (Jenkins 2009, p. 11).

2.4 VIRTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY

This paper focuses on how traditional photographic principles are simulated in game environments and inform game-specific virtual photography practices in enacting Aloy's heroism. If digital photography is perceived as capturing 'real' subjects through digital cameras, virtual photography is the skilled construction process and culture of aesthetics surrounding the expressive, creative production of virtual gaming images that simulate digital photography in game environments (Möring & Mutiis, 2019; Poremba, 2007). Virtual photography offers a documentary purpose for players to artistically capture in-game experiences, memories and events and share them (Poremba 2007). However, virtual photographers operate within the degrees of control over composition, subject, and game camera offered by a game system (Poremba 2007).

Virtual photography has evolved from simple captures of screen moments into significant cultural artefacts within the digital media landscape. However, the correct term for this kind of cultural production is debated among scholars. Švelch (2021) identifies three types of screenshots: screen capture, photographic screen capture, and screenshot. Poremba (2007) identifies content-centred and practice-based in-game screenshots. Möring & Mutiis (2019) describe four types of in-game photography: a) central to gameplay; b) via photomode; b) artistic screenshotting; and d) game modifications. They remark that photomode is an underexplored game mechanic, a gap filled by this article. I alternatively use the term 'virtual photography' when describing screenshots or in-game photography, as this is how online communities of gamers refer to the screenshots they share. The varying terminology used for artistic game screenshots reflects the diversity of screenshot usage, particularly in transformative practices like virtual photography.

The artistic screen capture, especially in the context of virtual photography, gained recognition through the work of interdisciplinary artist and media scholar Matteo Bittanti, and Domenico Quaranta, art critic and curator - co-writers of *Gamescenes: Art in the Age of Videogames* (2006). Duncan Harris, a “veteran capture artist” further popularised the artistic screen capture on *Dead End Thrills*, an online blog (Dead End Thrills, n.d.; Švelch, 2021). The introduction of photomode in video games democratised this practice, enabling hobbyists to produce and share their artistic screenshots. These in-game photographers often remove graphical interfaces from their captures, emphasising their creative input and contributing to the crowdsourced promotion of video games (Poremba 2007; Švelch 2021).

Moore (2014) explores the multifaceted role of screenshots in video games as a form of virtual photography. He emphasises their importance in documenting and expressing gaming experiences, as well as their broader significance in digital media, cybernetics, and social networks. As such, they transition from common digital items to treasured artefacts within gaming culture. Furthermore, Moore (2014) explains the concept of remediation - blending photographic, cinematic, and televisual elements - is essential in understanding the affective and representative nature of game screenshots. Despite the prevalence of transformative practices like textual poaching and remediation in fan cultures, scholarship on virtual photography via photomode remains limited. This study highlights this practice as a significant yet overlooked aspect of modern digital expression.

3 METHODOLOGY

The NHOP of Aloy is dissected in this article using a methodology adapted from Connell and Moore (2023). As depicted in Figure 3, the modified methodology integrates case study analysis, textual analysis, and auto ethnographic netnography.

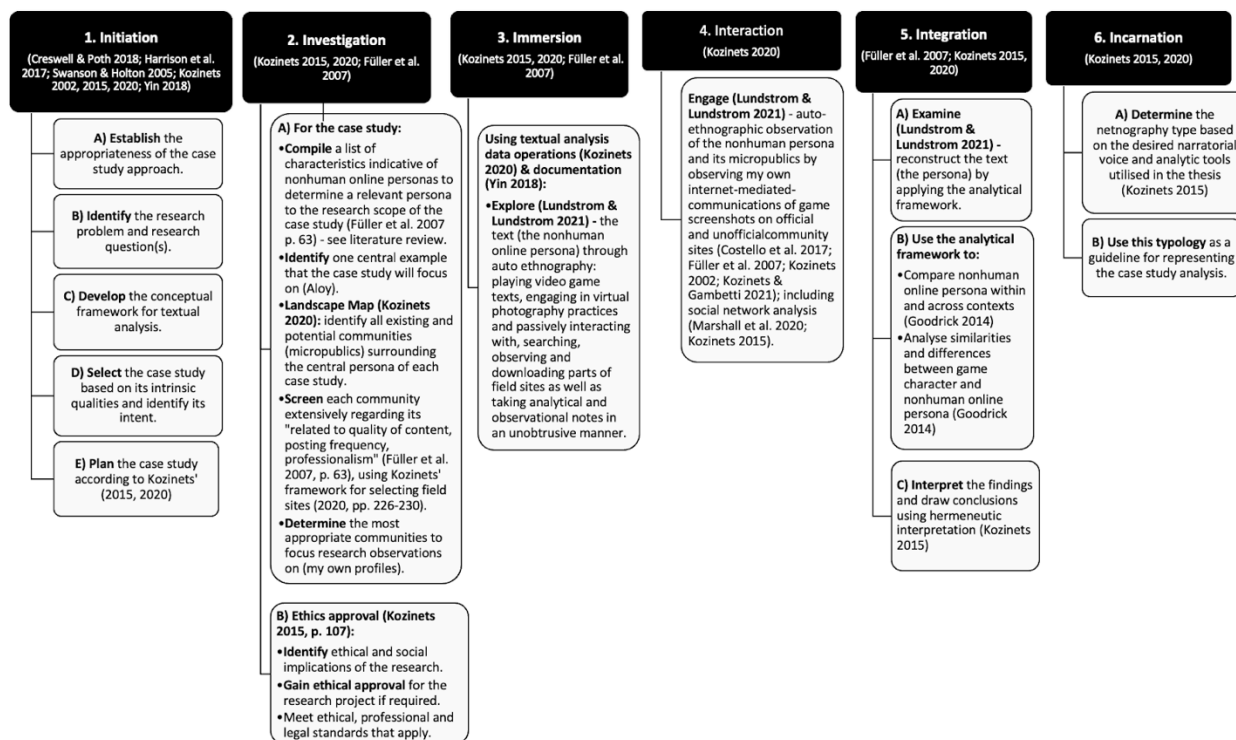


Figure 3: A visualisation of the research design for this article, adapted from Connell and Moore (2023). For a full-size version, refer to Appendix 1.

Building upon this research design, I explore a distinct case study of NHOP (Aloy), adopting Merriam's (1998) pragmatic constructivist approach of case study selection based on its relevance to the research question. This allows for a holistic, thematic analysis within a defined theoretical framework, as outlined in the Literature Review.

Following Roland Barthes' (1957) contention that texts encompass an array of communication methods and mediums, this article asserts that the 'text' of a NHOP emerges through a web of interactions across social media platforms, exposing a network of digitally visible relations. Using Lundström & Lundström's ethnographic method (2021), and discourse analysis (Berger, 2020; Fairclough, 2003) I contrast in-game representation with social media paratexts. This comparison seeks to deepen the understanding of NHOP's co-construction within micropublics, examining Aloy's portrayal of heroism, gender, and sexuality.

This study also harnesses netnography (Kozinets, 2015, 2020), a portmanteau of 'ethnography', 'networks', and 'internet' which emphasises collective assemblage and Web 2.0's networked sociality. To qualitatively examine NHOPs, I employ a tailored 6-step method adapted from Kozinets (2020) and Füller et al. (2007). The ethical intricacies of netnography within the public-private continuum of the internet, particularly regarding participant privacy (Kozinets, 2015; Marshall et al., 2020) were carefully considered during the writing of this paper. To ethically navigate these complexities, data collection was conducted auto-ethnographically, examining video game texts and my virtual photography depicting Aloy, spanning October 2022 to July 2023. While this paper does not encompass extensive observations of fan participation, it lays the groundwork for future research to expand understanding of the collective's role in NHOP co-curation.

3.1 CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

This case study investigates Aloy's NHOP as a text, composed through a collective of paratexts that arise from discourse about the persona, such as social media posts and interactions. It spotlights virtual photography (screenshots) as a significant mode of fan production that contributes to the overall assemblage of Aloy's persona. This research aims to highlight the role audiences play in co-curating Aloy's NHOP.

Aloy navigates a post-apocalyptic United States where humans, living in dispersed tribes, utilise developing technologies to survive in a world overrun by dangerous, animalistic machines. She is a character who embarks on a mission to uncover her roots and unravel the mysteries behind the ancient world's collapse. Utilising her unique ability to command ancient technology, combat tools and physical prowess, Aloy's journey pits her against various adversaries, leads her to a connection with scientist Elisabet Sobeck, and sees her saving the world not once, but twice. Her narrative is chronicled in a series of video game

titles including *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (HZD) (Guerrilla Games, 2017a) and its DLC *Frozen Wilds* (Guerrilla Games, 2017b), HFW (Guerrilla Games, 2022), BS (Guerrilla Games, 2023b), and *Horizon: Call of the Mountain* (Guerrilla Games, 2023a).

Beyond the primary game series, Aloy's character extends into paratexts. She appears as a playable character in *Monster Hunter: World* (2018), features in a skin (virtual, in-game clothing) for *Fortnite Battle Royale* (2017), makes an appearance as an easter egg in *Astro's Playroom* (2020), and is central to the HZD board game (Steamforged Games Ltd, 2020) and comic book series (Tool, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022). Additionally, a live-action Netflix series based on Aloy's adventures was announced in 2023 (Bernal, 2024), perhaps, following the trend of televisual video game adaptations popularised by HBO's *The Last of Us* series (*The Last of Us*, 2023).

Aloy's presence also extends into fan creations, such as game captures, fan fiction, and fan art, shared across various online platforms. These fan-made outputs cumulatively contribute to shaping Aloy's online persona, acting as paratexts that enrich and diversify her character portrayal (Figure 4). Intertextuality of this nature is not uncommon within RPG's, with popular characters like Geralt of Rivia from the *Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, 2022) and Kratos from the *God of War* series (Ready At Dawn, 2009, 2010; Santa Monica Studio, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2018, 2022) appearing across several forms of media both canon and non-canon, developer and fan-produced.

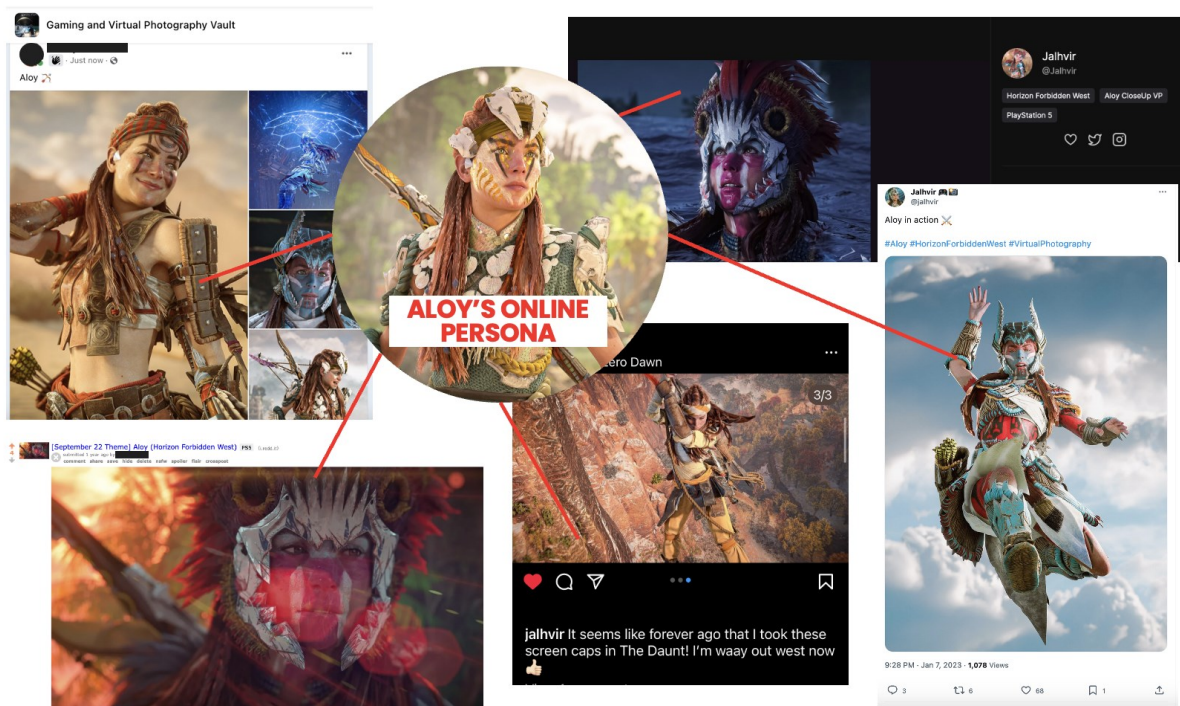


Figure 4: A diagram illustrating examples of the author's virtual photography of Aloy on social media platforms including Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, X, and Picashot.

Aloy was selected for this case study because her character contributes to the broader understanding of NHOPs in gaming contexts. Aloy is perceived as a well-written female video game hero and her character development is an interesting example of the relationship between fans and developers. Aloy's queerness is a matter of debate within the fandom, emphasising the importance of the collective dimension, as paratextual elements are pertinent in considering her heroic representation through a NHOP. As such, Aloy's character allows for an examination of both developer-intended and player-interpreted heroism.

Aloy is the most timely choice for study within this article's scope, given the recent release of *Burning Shores* DLC and its impact on Aloy's potentially queer character development. Aloy is gaining scholarly attention, providing suitable supporting literature for a persona-related game hero study. She is also a popular subject of virtual photography in online communities, because of HFW's advanced photomode capabilities.

The scope of ethical play is important when considering an individual player's experience of embodying heroic traits. However, customisable RPG characters like V from *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2024) were not selected in this study, as they require a more complex framework that accounts for the player's increased agency to construct the protagonist's heroic ethics. To combat this limitation, a study of V through virtual photography and other fan productions is featured in a forthcoming study that builds on the research presented in this article.

The case study of Aloy presents a dual opportunity: firstly, to examine how Aloy embodies heroism, how the representation of her gender and sexuality inform her character, and how virtual photographers may adhere to or deviate from this portrayal in their video game screenshots. Secondly, it allows for the consideration of *Horizon* fans' virtual photography as an exemplar of the various paratexts that shape Aloy's online persona.

4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 ALOY: THE HEROIC VIDEO GAME CHARACTER

Aloy is acclaimed as a great female video game hero, due to the decentralisation of gender from her primary identity, challenging the conventional binaries of gender and sexuality (Allen, 2023; Owens, 2022). Her portrayal navigates a liminal space between hero and heroine, subverting typical representations in a manner that has sparked discussions and speculation about her sexual orientation (Allen 2023). This analysis explores Aloy's depiction through the lens of heroism, gender, and sexuality studies, employing textual analysis of HZD and HFW, alongside academic and journalistic sources.

Video game character analysis encompasses players' narrative, ludic, and social experiences (Schröter & Thon, 2014). The narrative involves the game world, story,

characters, setting, and plot. Ludics, derived from Ludology, focuses on the game's nonlinearity, interactivity, goals, and motivations (Chandler & Munday, 2020), emphasising game rules and mechanics (Jesper, 2004). This is crucial for analysing Aloy's heroic representation through a NHOP, facilitated by features like photomode, allowing player control over her online portrayal. Social elements, particularly fan culture within virtual photography, are key to understanding the participatory fan cultures that facilitate the assemblage of this NHOP.

This analysis, akin to Allen (2023), examines Aloy using the Great Eight Traits of Heroism (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 194; Allison & Goethals, 2010, p. 62); ludically, by considering game mechanics that shed light on her sexuality representation; and socially, through fan discourse on her character in online news articles and virtual photography.

4.2 THE REPRESENTATION OF ALOY'S HEROISM IN GAME TEXTS

Aloy's heroism is crafted through both game narrative and player choices, underscoring her character's dynamic nature. She embodies a monomythic hero, uniquely positioned to overcome a looming, global threat and restore world order (Jennings, 2022). Aloy's journey starts as an orphan and outcast in the Nora tribe, a setting that conceals her extraordinary origin as a clone of Dr. Elisabet Sobeck, the architect of Project Zero Dawn and the robotic wildlife. Created by the AI GAIA to carry Sobeck's DNA, Aloy is destined to access vital facilities and halt the Derangement, ensuring Earth's continued survival.

The games combine ludic (gameplay) and narrative (story) elements, offering players an interactive experience where they shape Aloy's journey with their choices. Thus, through the game texts of HZD and HFW, players make decisions that reflect the Great Eight Traits of Heroism (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 194; Allison & Goethals, 2010, p. 62), enabling

active participation in shaping Aloy's heroic journey via dialogue options, moral choices, and character interactions (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Examples of Aloy's heroic attributes, depicted through the authors' virtual photography.

Her caring nature is evident as she aids injured Nora tribesmen, showcasing compassion regardless of background or affiliation. Aloy's charisma shines through when she unites the Tenakth rebel faction against the Far Zenith, demonstrating her leadership and ability to inspire others. Her determination and courage in facing threats like the Thunderjaw and HADES highlight her as an inspirational figure, admired for her bravery and unique understanding of ancient technology.

Aloy's reliability is proven by her loyalty to the Nora despite her outcast status and her commitment to aiding Sylens with ancient tech, despite his betrayals. Her resilience is clear when the looming danger of NEMESIS is revealed at the close of HFW, where Aloy perseveres, just as she did in HZD when she returned to her tribe as an outcast to compete in the Proving. Aloy's selflessness is demonstrated by her altruistic willingness to put others'

needs before her own. Her intelligence and strategic thinking are key aspects of her character, particularly when sneaking past monstrous machines and in complex situations like the decision to spare or kill Olin and Helis.

Finally, Aloy's strength, both physical and emotional, is evident throughout her journey. Her combat prowess and leadership command respect, enabling her to guide groups and make critical decisions under pressure. These traits, combined with player-driven dialogue choices that influence her moral stance, illustrate Aloy's comprehensive heroism, reflecting her dynamic character in the context of contemporary video game heroism.

4.3 THE REPRESENTATION OF ALOY'S GENDER & SEXUALITY IN GAME TEXTS

As female protagonists become more prevalent in video games, the representation and negotiation of gender, alongside its impact on gameplay, warrants scrutiny (Cisneros 2014). Despite the historical precedent of the Greek mythological Hero originally being female, (Goethals & Allison, 2012), women remain underrepresented in video games (Labre & Duke, 2004). While female characters have grown more common, their portrayal often aligns with androcentric standards (Allen 2023). The industry, despite progressing past egregious hyper-sexualisation, still largely shapes female characters to meet male-oriented notions of attractiveness and behaviour, with games generally crafted for a male audience (Lynch et al., 2016; Perreault et al., 2018; Tompkins & Martins, 2022).

The *Horizon* games distinctively do not anchor Aloy's heroism to her gender or sexuality but rather her status as an outcast, as she faces exclusion and hostility from the Nora tribe due to her mysterious birth, which significantly shapes her experience. This approach shifts focus from traditional gender roles and romantic narratives, challenging "hetero-amatocentric narrative expectations in female-led games that function as a form of benevolent sexism" (Allen 2023, p.3). Aloy's representation has faced criticism for "reinforc[ing]

anthropocentrism, white supremacy, settler-colonialism and capitalist accumulation as the naturalised, universalized orders of things" (Jennings 2022). However, scholars like Owens (2020) and Allen (2023) argue her character represents an advancement of classical heroism, incorporating both traditional traits and modern complexities. This makes the application of queer theory pertinent to the analysis of Aloy's depiction, as it questions and deconstructs established norms around gender and sexuality.

Aloy's character subverts classical heroic gender archetypes by embodying traits of both the hero and the heroine, redefining heroism beyond gender constraints. According to Owens (2020), theoretical texts on heroism often depict the hero as a societal protector, leader, and moral order restorer. In contrast, the heroine is traditionally associated with purity, submissiveness, and an internal struggle with her gender identity (Basinger, 1993 and Kaplan, 1983 as cited in Owens 2020). Aloy demonstrates (masculine) hero traits when she seeks to combat the driving malevolent forces of the games' plot - HADES in HZD and Far Zenith in HFB - showcasing her twin roles to protect society and restore moral order. Alternatively, her heroic journey is ripe with heroine (feminine) elements, most notably through her internal struggle to understand the origins of her birth. Aloy's character rejects the binary division of male/female traits, subverting elements of both through her assertiveness, physicality that is "unmatched by [other] characters" and the de-feminisation of her compassion and empathy for others, demonstrating "that being a woman does not inherently mean she needs to be protected" (Allen 2023, p. 10).

However, as Connell and Comerford (2023, p. 5) explain, 'strong' female heroes, like Aloy, are "nonetheless sexualised". Scholars have explored the sexualisation of female video game heroes, noting a tendency for female protagonists to don revealing attire and possess exaggerated body features to cater to a male audience, and requiring a blend of feminine beauty standards with masculine traits to be deemed acceptable heroes (Behm-Morawitz,

2017; Labre & Duke, 2004; McHenry, 2021). Even Aloy is not impervious to sexualisation, despite the redaction of gender from her narrative, through the ludic element of scantily clad armour sets; albeit most of her armour sets are practical and fuller coverage (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: A comparison of a scantily clad armour set versus a more practical, fuller-coverage armour set available in HFW through the authors' virtual photography.

The social response to Aloy's character, which challenges traditional gender and sexuality norms, was mixed. Without a flawed narrative or tokenistic portrayal to critique, fans focused on her design, notably criticising her appearance for not being "feminine enough" (Baker-Whitelaw, 2021; Nightingale, 2021; Figure 7). This highlights how gaming communities support female representation until it questions male dominance, leading to



hostile feedback (Allen 2023).

Figure 7: A fan tweet that "compares a frowning image of Aloy with some fanart where she has Facetune-perfect skin, gleaming white teeth, and a full face of makeup" (Baker-Whitelaw 2021)

Beyond Aloy's dismantling of hero/heroine binaries, an optional sapphic kiss between Aloy and Seyka in BS, marks a queer dimension in Aloy's heroic representation. The release sparked controversy, leading to review bombing by some players who objected to the inclusion of a queer storyline (Dastoor, 2023). The inclusion demonstrates a conscious decision by Guerrilla Games to embrace and affirm LGBTQIA+ identities despite potential backlash and contributes to the broader discourse on diversity and inclusion in the gaming industry. However, their decision to give agency to players to represent Aloy as a queer hero could potentially be tokenistic.

The inclusion of a romance mechanic itself for Aloy is significant, let alone one that carries a potential queer identity. In a deviation from RPG norms, Aloy's narrative arc did not centre on a romantic relationship in HZD and HFB. Romance mechanics - the ability to engage in romantic relationships with non-playable-characters (NPCs) via dialogue options - are a staple in popular RPG titles such as *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015, 2019, 2022), *Cyberpunk:2077* (2024) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023). In *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015, 2019, 2022), players can choose to pursue intimate relationships with NPCs Yennifer or Triss. While these choices seem trivial, they are opportunities for players to engage with the hero's moral universe and assume their ethical responsibilities (Bowman, 2018; Yee, 2019 as cited in Tu et al., 2022;). In Geralt's case, the option of either romance option does not severely impact the outcome of the game narrative (King, 2024), but it does present the player with a moral decision: which of your previous lovers will you return to? What does this say about Geralt's integrity as a hero? Such dimensions of Aloy's heroism were absent until the release of BS in 2023.

An option for Aloy to reciprocate potential love interests' advances is not built into the dialogue options for HZD and HFW base games, leaving players to question if she is

asexual, aromantic, or uninterested in relationships (Cook, 2023). Allen (2023) notes that delaying the introduction of a romance option until after over 60 hours of gameplay allows players to first engage with Aloy's heroism and non-traditional gender role before exploring her intimate relationships. BS then offers an optional romance mechanic exclusively with a female character, challenging hetero-amatonormativity (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Aloy's optional sapphic kiss with Seyka in the HFW: BS DLC depicted in the author's own virtual photography.

This choice allows Aloy to be portrayed as either attracted to women or disinterested in romance, both representing queer orientations (Allen 2023). Even if players opt-out of the kiss, Aloy is still an RPG hero whose romantic representation diverges from the norm. Hence, representation of Aloy's intimate personal relationships are subordinate to her hero and heroine traits.

Guerrilla Games' decision to introduce a queer romance option for Aloy, may have been influenced by extensive fan discourse on her sexual orientation (see: Cook, 2023; Kaur, 2023). This inclusion could be seen as fan service, a concrete response to fans' expressed desires through online discourse (Carrington, 2019). However, the decision could be interpreted as virtue signalling, ingenuine or tokenistic due to its placement in a DLC, outside the primary game narrative. Whether Aloy's representation as queer is truly inclusive or confirmed canon is something that can only be established in the next *Horizon* release, which is speculated but yet to be confirmed (Fischer, 2024).

Regardless of potential queering, Aloy still represents subverted gender and sexuality expectations of a ‘strong’ female. However, this is not to conflate Aloy’s success as a female hero with use of the ‘strong female hero’ trope or a queer identity, but rather, because she is well-rounded hero. The ‘strong female hero’ trope, which aims to combat hyper-sexualisation of female heroes, is historically problematic in video games (Behm-Morawitz, 2017; Cisneros, 2014; Labre & Duke, 2004). Typically, a ‘strong’ female hero rejects feminine traits, adopting masculine ones but are nevertheless, still sexualised, operating under feminine beauty standards (Connell and Comerford 2023). Aloy is ranked highly for her representation as a female video game hero (Owens 2022), due to her balance of masculine and feminine heroic traits and focus on heroic tropes in opposition to gender norms, as explored above. While Aloy was designed to resemble ‘normal’ women (Tassi, 2021), she is still subject to the misogynistic game community who wish to uphold sexualised beauty standards for her physical representation (see: Figure 7). However, as Owens (2022) explores, Aloy’s femininity is still negotiated as part of her heroism, rather than fully rejected, making her a well-written ‘strong female’ hero.

The analysis will now turn to examine Aloy’s NHOP, focusing on how fans embody her heroism beyond the game through fan productions of virtual photography.

5 THE COLLECTIVE ASSEMBLAGE OF ALOY’S NONHUMAN ONLINE PERSONA: THE ROLE OF FANS & VIRTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Players bring Aloy’s heroic representation to life through their embodiment of her character in *Horizon* gameplay and co-production of her NHOP through the virtual photography they share. As previously discussed, they embody Aloy’s heroic representation through identification with her, mirroring her emotions and developing emotional

attachments to her (Burgess & Jones, 2021). However, Burgess & Jones (2021) found that while players identify with Aloy, they saw her as having a distinct persona which players simply guided and controlled, rather than merging with their own persona. This distinction is an important step in defining where Aloy's character ends and the online persona begins, and the role of fans in co-curating the persona.

Beyond demonstrating contemporary fan-producer relations, virtual photography fan cultures highlight the integral role of fans in co-curating Aloy's NHOP assemblage as human actors who are highly performative and productive. Thus, the following section will provide an auto-ethnographic account of engaging in virtual photography of Aloy to explore aspects of heroism, gender and sexuality evident in her NHOP using the five dimensions of online persona (Marshall et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2017) as a framework.

5.1 MEET JALHVIR, MY GAMER PERSONA

When engaging with video games, I transform from Jasmyn to Jalhvir, a digital counterpart whose adventures are documented through virtual photography as an extension of Jalhvir's virtual life across game narratives. The name Jalhvir, originating from a Skyrim name generator, has become a key part of my gamer identity.

Gamer personas, as discussed by Tomkinson & Elliott (2021, p. 27), are online identities crafted within gaming communities, where cultural capital such as gaming skills and knowledge enhances one's reputation. This concept extends to virtual photography, where such cultural capital can elevate the prestige of a gamer persona. Jalhvir's virtual photography captures moments that combine my personal memories with collective game narratives (Moore 2014). My artistic in-game screenshots are pivotal in shaping my online gaming persona, enabling me to curate and share my cultural experiences and achievements

within *Horizon* games. The distribution of virtual photography across social media platforms integrates them into my networked identity performance (Moore 2014), and simultaneously intercommunicates Aloy's NHOP.

Jalhvir typically embodies a virtuous hero, favouring diplomacy and non-lethal outcomes, with a preference for stealth and ranged combat. This play style thoroughly aligns with Aloy's in-game representation. However, as my gaming interests evolved to include titles like *God of War* (2020) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2024), Jalhvir's character adapted to more morally complex roles, embracing the anti-hero archetype. This shift allowed me to distinguish my moral compass from Jalhvir's, and each game hero who I embody.

The distinction between a character, their NHOP and Jalhvir's enactment of their persona through virtual photography in acts of heroic play is a complex matter. The agency that each game offers to explore ethical pathways, combined with the freedoms and limitations of in-built photomodes affects my desire and ability to represent the hero in congruent or oppositional ways. *Horizon* games offer a limited scope for exploring adverse ethical pathways due to a largely linear game narrative, so it is no surprise to see a continuation of Aloy as a virtuous hero in my virtual photography.

Jalhvir's online presence spans several platforms including X, Instagram, Picashot, and Reddit, all under the handle '@Jalhvir'. These profiles showcase Jalhvir's adventures, utilising relevant hashtags and indicating the current game being played, thereby narrating Jalhvir's journey through virtual photography (Figure 9). Throughout the analysis that follows, I have used my Jalhvir profile to monitor the five dimensions of Aloy's NHOP, providing a fan account of virtual photography activities that contribute to the collective formation of her NHOP assemblage.



Figure 9: Example social media profiles of Jalhvir (X, Instagram)

5.2 THE DIMENSIONS OF ALOY'S NONHUMAN ONLINE PERSONA

Aloy's NHOP is a collective, layered assemblage, as it is a complex entity composed of relationships and interactions between individual components and multiple parties, enmeshed with, but distinct from, the video game character. The following critical analysis examines a collection of 68 social media posts between January 2022 and July 2023 on X (48 posts), Reddit (2 posts), Picashot (2 posts) and Instagram (16 posts). These posts contain in-game screenshots of Aloy, published under the alias Jalhvir, my gamer persona. The collection of virtual photography represents my contribution to the heroisation of Aloy's NHOP. Utilising the five dimensions of online persona, the analysis will demonstrate the distinction between Aloy's character and her NHOP, discuss how her NHOP comes into being, and explore the literacies involved for fans when producing virtual photography of Aloy.

Publicness highlights the expansive potential exposure within online environments (Moore et al. 2017; Marshall et al. 2020). Moore et al. (2017) identify publicness as a core dimension of online persona, where users of online social networks engage in public expressions of the self. Aloy's NHOP is public, because it exists through the collective of

public digital artefacts that depict the video game character. Virtual photography is found across social media platforms, tied to the gamer personas of players.

The compilation of fan creations shaping Aloy's online persona is a focal point of this case, forming an assemblage for a single nonhuman entity not confined to 'official' field sites but instead spanning a web of 'unofficial' sites in the form of paratexts. This case is significant in its emphasis on the collective dimension, which represents the negotiation between the 'individual' persona and several public collectives (audiences). The collective aspect of Aloy's persona acts as a "meta-collective complex" (Moore et al. 2017, p. 6), wherein an individual functions as a component within numerous, intersecting micropublics. These micropublics facilitate interactions like friending, following, tagging, posting, sharing, and liking, which constitute intercommunications (Barbour et al. 2014; boyd & Ellison 2007; Marshall 2015, 2014).

Mediatisation of a persona occurs when digital technologies and internet systems are used in the creation of content (paratexts) as accompanying materials of the 'individual' online persona (Marshall et al. 2020). Similarly, Aloy's NHOP is formed through an assemblage of online paratexts - a core distinction being that these paratexts are not produced by the human individual 'behind' the online persona. Rather, they are produced by individuals within vast, and overlapping micropublics. In this case, the fan productions of Aloy through virtual photography and a plethora of other methods, mediatise Aloy's NHOP as an extension of the video game character. Addressing the range of representations available among these micropublics is outside the scope of this article, a limitation I hope to address in future publications on the topic.

As Jalhvir, I mediatise Aloy's NHOP through social media posts that remix *Horizon* game texts in intertextual and intercommunicative ways. Intertextually, my virtual

photography selectively incorporates elements of the HZD and HFW game narratives, depicting quest lines and combat such as in Figure 10. However, most of my work utilises photomode to engage in portraiture of Aloy. Over time, the intertextual connection between my virtual photography paratexts and the *Horizon* game texts simply became the image of Aloy. Rather than depicting Aloy's heroic exploits and providing commentary on them as if from Aloy's perspective, I developed a visual style unique to my virtual photography: portraiture of Aloy in a 2:3 aspect ratio, depicting the detail of costumes and facial adornments (shown in Figure 11).

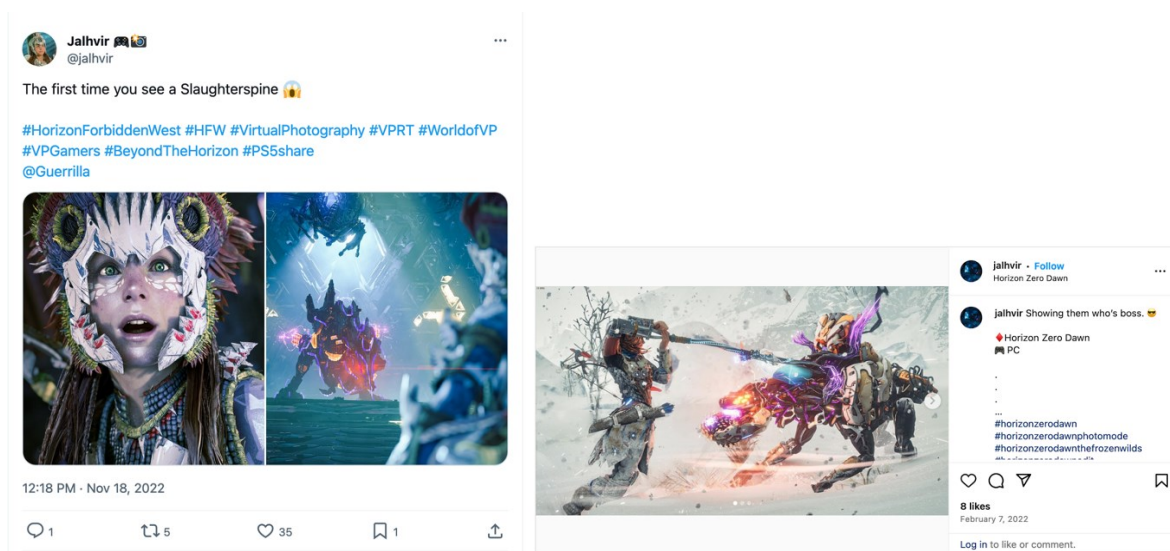


Figure 10: Social media posts by Jalhvir, showcasing intertextual connections to HZD and HFW questlines and combat (left, right).

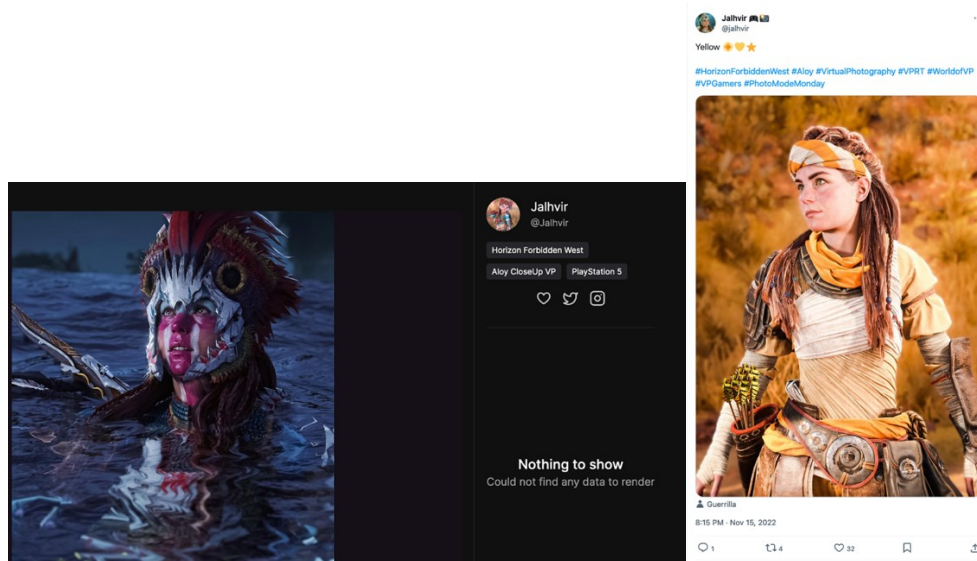


Figure 11: Examples of portraiture of Aloy posted by Jalhvir (left, right).

The mediatisation of Aloy's NHOP in this manner has an intercommunicative function, as it produces networked activities in the form of likes, shares and comments. The collation of these networked interactions form intercommunicative networks - micropublics. Jalhvir has micropublics on each social media platform. Users within Jalhvir's micropublics on X, may overlap to micropublics on Reddit and vice versa. Similarly, Aloy's NHOP has vast micropublics, but not in the traditional sense, as there are no concrete 'official' sites to mediatise her online persona. Instead, these micropublics form around the many 'unofficial' sites that comprise the 'whole' of her NHOP assemblage.

One of the primary aspects through which Aloy's NHOP emerges is through its performative dimension. A performative quality is inherent in constructing an online public 'self' (Marshall et al. 2020). The collective performance of Aloy's NHOP is difficult to articulate, given the abstractness of its formation through complex layers of texts, paratexts, intertextuality and intercommunication. Separately, these texts and paratexts are lone digital objects, connected to the online personas of those who published them. Together, they form a recognisable entity that is Aloy, or rather, a *performance* of Aloy in the form of a collectively

realised NHOP. Thus, assemblage theory is applied to conceptualise how Aloy's NHOP emerges through the interaction between parts (DeLanda, 2006, p. 5). Each individual level (such as a user within a micropublic) is also comprised of a complex assemblage of parts, and each 'level' of the persona assemblage "incorporates the emergent properties of the level immediately producing it" (Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016, p. 63). Here, a NHOP is a product of the individual nodes that assemble it; in turn, each individual user is a function of their assembling forces such as social norms and conventions of an online community.

The layers that comprise Aloy's NHOP assemblage involve: (1) Aloy, the video game character and her heroic, gender and sexuality representation, as outlined above; (2) the performance of Aloy by individuals through paratexts (which reinforces or challenges the representation of her video game character); (3) the societal norms operating within both levels; (4) the technologies involved in depicting both levels; (5) the rules and regulations that govern the cultures of both levels; and (6) 'blackbox' elements - the inner workings of cultures and technologies that are not known or accessible, like a social media algorithm (Bucher, 2018).

Aloy's video game character is the nucleus of the assemblage and forms the basis of our understanding of her NHOP's characteristics and traits. Surrounding this central identity is my personal interpretation of Aloy's heroic, gender and sexual representation, embodied through my gameplay and virtual photography. Thus, the performative dimension offers a lens to draw comparisons between Aloy's character and her NHOP.

Through virtual photography, users may develop the traits of heroism evident in Aloy's narrative characterisation, as showcased in Figure 12 through four distinct instances. Aloy embodies courage, braving the mysteries of a Cauldron and engaging in combat with a colossal robotic creature. Her exceptional ability to interact with and decipher ancient

technology earns her admiration from peers, marking her as an admirable figure. Aloy also emerges as a natural leader; despite not actively seeking leadership roles, she steps up in critical moments, uniting those around her towards shared objectives. Moreover, her compassion is poignantly illustrated in her interactions with Regalla, a former adversary. Aloy's empathetic facial expressions as she witnesses Regalla's self-sacrifice for their mutual cause highlight her deep empathy. This moment, following Aloy's earlier decision to spare Regalla, underscores her compassionate nature, moral compass, inspirational impact, and strategic intelligence, showcasing her reluctance to resort to violence even against adversaries.



Figure 12: instances where the Great Eight Traits of Heroism are evident in Jalhvir's virtual photography.

Alternatively, virtual photography provides players with the flexibility to remix Aloy's in-game representation. As Poremba (2007) explains, virtual photography is a game-like practice and strategic endeavour, with compositional rules, drawn from digital photography practices, that an individual may 'break'. Sontag also notes that photography can be a means for "appropriating or gaining power over the photographic subject" (1977, pp.

155–156). When I capture images of Aloy, I gain power over her heroic representation due to the agencies afforded by photomode, where I adhere to or break compositional and representational rules. This is demonstrated in Figure 13 by the contrast between an in-game screenshot of a cut-scene (part of the canon narrative) and an unpublished, potentially sexualised, photomode-produced portrait.



Figure 13: An in-game screenshot of a cutscene versus an in-game screenshot produced using photomode.

Jalhvir's imagining of Aloy acknowledges her heroic roots while representing her in a more stylised, artistic manner to adhere to virtual photography aesthetic standards. This approach to depicting Aloy's heroism can be attributed to how photomode suspends gameplay, providing a liminal space to isolate scenes and actions or create entirely new ones (Möring & Mutiis 2019). Photomode allows for manipulation of the game camera, using simulated digital photography features like aperture and digital zoom (Möring & Mutiis 2019), highlighting virtual photography as a vehicle for collective contribution to a NHOP separate from Aloy's character, with its own heroic, gender, and sexuality traits.

Curation plays a crucial role in this collective performance, with each node within the network of micropublics contributing uniquely. From my library of 488 images, only 68

carefully selected and refined pieces were made public, underscoring the meticulous attention to detail in Jalhvir's contributions. Although my private gallery offers valuable insights for comparative analysis between Aloy's in-game character and her NHOP, it does not form part of the NHOP, as it is not publicly available. My public contributions to Aloy's NHOP often focus on portraiture in static, posed positions rather than in-game acts of heroism, partly due to the technical complexity of capturing combat scenes that adhere to virtual photography aesthetic standards. This approach reflects both the affordances and constraints of the photomode system and my artistic gaming identity, as I develop my own social media persona alongside Aloy's NHOP. The resulting body of work has intertextuality with *Horizon* texts, forming paratextual elements of Aloy's NHOP assemblage and serving as intercommunications within the community. My performative experiences represent one individual users' negotiation with collectives in the formation of Aloy's NHOP. To fully grasp the collective interplay of paratexts and performances that define Aloy's NHOP, future research should include a wider sample, drawing on other artists, to understand the nuances of this complex layering of paratexts and performances.

Alternatively, for Jalhvir, being a member of Aloy's micropublics and contributing to the performance of her NHOP involves the simultaneous performance of a gamer persona and public affiliation to the *Horizon* fandom. This fandom affiliation involves communicating cultural capital, and demonstrating several digital literacies, that are the labour of love involved in participating in virtual photography. As Book (2003) explains, achieving the desired composition necessitates unique technical skills of photomode controls or other means of capturing in-game screenshots. Accordingly, when capturing images of video game heroes, virtual photographers embody characters (performance), utilise game mechanics and virtual photographic tools to remix game and narrative elements (simulation, distributed cognition, transmedia navigation, and appropriation) and leverage community knowledge to

share techniques, uphold aesthetic standards perform a gamer persona and co-curate to Aloy's NHOP (collective intelligence, judgement, networking and negotiation). The application of Jenkins' literacies to these virtual photography skills is outlined in Figure 14.

| Literacy | Definition | Application to virtual photography of Aloy |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Play | The capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving. | Engaging in play and embodiment of heroic ventures through video games. |
| Performance | The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. | Performance of the Jalhvir gamer persona. |
| Simulation | The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. | Taking in-game screenshots using varied methods across consoles and game titles. |
| Appropriation | The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. | Remixing media content when editing video game screenshots. |
| Multitasking | The ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details. | Bulk-editing hundreds of screenshots at a time, and bulk-uploading posts. |
| Distributed Cognition | The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities. | Utilising the mechanics of video games in creative ways, and utilising social media as a virtual diary of Jalhvir's adventures. |
| Collective Intelligence | The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal. | Learning the virtual photography community norms and strategies for success through observation and questioning. |
| Judgement | The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources. | Engaging in fan discourse about <i>Horizon</i> games and seeking sources to validate information. |
| Transmedia Navigation | The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities. | Navigating the transmedia narrative of Aloy's character; and interpreting her NHOP assemblage by interacting with online paratexts. |
| Networking | The ability to search for, synthesise, and disseminate information. | Interacting with other members of the virtual photography community, sometimes asking for advice. |
| Negotiation | The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. | Negotiating the various platforms where the virtual photography community exists and understanding the popularity and conventions of each. |

Figure 14: A table outlining how each of Jenkins' digital literacies for participatory cultures (2009) are utilised during the virtual photography process.

The value dimension considers the worth of an online persona using metrics of the attention economy (quantifiable social media interactions such as likes). It is labelled "VARP" by Marshall et al. (2020, p. 72), to include value, agency, reputation, and prestige. Utilising photomode artistically (see: Möring & Mutiis 2019) and demonstrating Jenkins' digital literacies (2009) forms a major part of Jalhvir's gamer persona, where the reputation and prestige of the gamer persona and Aloy's NHOP have a semi-reciprocal relationship.

Aloy, as a nonhuman, fictional game character, does not have the agency or autonomy to create and sustain an online persona. Instead, this formation of her online persona relies on the collective, and exists in the form of an assemblage, which opposes popular persona theorisation that places online persona as an extension of a singular human consciousness. For NHOPs, agency is afforded to the network of human and nonhuman actors who assemble the NHOP via paratexts including fans, non-fans, anti-fans, social media algorithms, platform moderation policies and bots and more.

As such, Aloy's NHOP is almost entirely paratextual, where each individual paratext has a degree of intertextuality with Aloy's heroic representation. Furthermore, the HFW photomode offers expansive agencies to players to control their heroic representation of Aloy through virtual photography which may align with or oppose Aloy's in-game character representation as explored above. Figure 15 additionally highlights how photomode enables players to adjust Aloy's physical appearance through various face paints, facial expressions, and body poses. Players can opt to hide or show Aloy's character and have a wealth of camera and scenery controls and editing tools available to customise their screenshot. Face paints, like the 'mark of pride' (which predates BS), reinforce Aloy's queer representation (Stewart, 2022). While, players may utilise body poses and facial expressions that do not align with Aloy's stoic nature, such as the pout and 'heart' pose demonstrated in Figure 15.

However, the ability to deviate from Aloy's virtuous heroic representation ludically and via photomode, is limited.

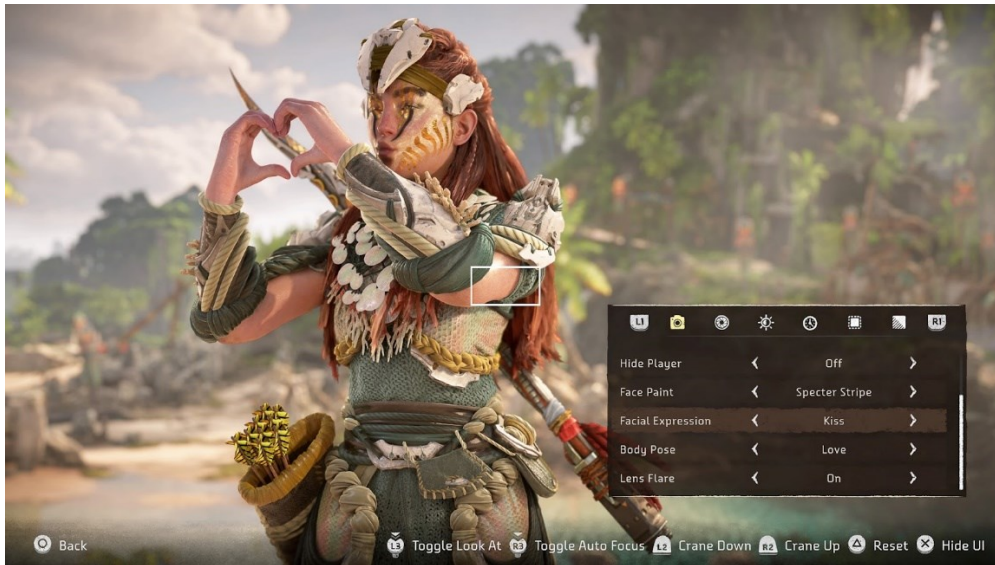


Figure 15: A screenshot demonstrating the capabilities of HFW's in-game photomode.

The VARP dimension recognises the fluid nature of personas, shaped by technology and norms, where Aloy's NHOP enriched with diverse purposes through fan contributions. My decision to engage in the sapphic kiss with Seyka, after 154 hours of combined gameplay, felt authentic to Aloy's character. Capturing this moment via in-game screenshots (without photomode adjustments) served as documentation of a significant event, illustrating games as "double-layered objects consisting of mechanics... and semiotics..., which come into being through the process of gameplay" (Aarseth 2011 cited in Möring & Mutiis 2019, p. 73). My desire for a more picturesque representation of this scene, expressed on X (Jalhvir 🎮📷 [@jalhvir], 2023), highlights the personal significance of this moment and the limitations of player agency in certain game contexts. This experience affirmed Aloy's NHOP as potentially queer through Jalhvir's perspective, demonstrating how individual gamers' beliefs, play styles, and curation choices shape the representation of heroism beyond the game's diegetic space. Therefore, Jalhvir's virtual photography exemplifies the complex

nature of interweaving a personal persona, a gamer identity, Aloy's in-game representation, and the technosocial context of fan productions into Aloy's NHOP assemblage.

The use of fan-produced content for free marketing by game developers further underscores the interplay between VARP and the collective aspects of Aloy's NHOP, with fans like Jalhvir operating under the attention economy, trading free labour for social engagement. This complex layering involves Guerrilla Games and Aloy as nonhuman actors, Jalhvir as a human actor, and attention economy dynamics as a non-actor, all influencing the interconnected reputations and value of each. Guerrilla's strategic use of user-generated-content for marketing (Švelch, 2021) benefits both the developers and fans, as it boosts the prestige of both Jalhvir's and Aloy's personas. This 'multisocial' relationship (Hills, 2015) between Guerrilla and fans has revealed two, mutually beneficial purposes: (1) Guerrilla's fan service through Aloy's queering acknowledged fan desires for diverse heroic representations; and (2) Guerrilla's use of virtual photography content to market *Horizon* games capitalises on fan labour in the performance of Aloy's NHOP.

However, the heart of virtual photography culture lies not just in the creation, but in the joy of participation and the fervent desire to portray Aloy's heroism. For Jalhvir, the drive to partake in virtual photography transcends tangible rewards, such as enhancing a gamer persona's prestige. This epitomises the allure of fan cultures: their richness, unpredictability, and the intrinsic motivation to reinterpret and remix media texts. These activities not only generate paratexts imbued with fresh meanings but also foster complex networks of social interactions and even the emergence of NHOPs like Aloy. This passion underpins the current research, aiming to spark further exploration into the nuanced dynamics of participatory fan cultures.

6 CONCLUSION

This article adds to the growing body of work defining various forms of online persona, underscoring the need for detailed study into the intricate layers of NHOP assemblages. Building on Connell and Moore (2023), it develops methodologies for exploring such personas, defining NHOP as a decentralised entity that relies on co-curation between various actors to form the assemblage. This approach develops existing theories of agency, immersion, and heroic traits in relation to video gaming, persona studies and fan studies – bridging several gaps through the intersections of these areas. While this article is limited in its focus on a single fan’s perspective, it lays the groundwork for future research. Forthcoming doctoral work addresses this by analysing virtual photography of Aloy from a broader sample of fans, providing a holistic interpretation of how virtual photography contributes to the collective construction of her NHOP as a heroic, potentially queer, female game hero.

The case study of Aloy’s NHOP reveals how video game heroes can transcend their game narratives through fan participation. The comparison between Aloy’s video game character and her NHOP reveals her subversion of tokenism and gender norms, blending hero and heroine qualities to create an authentic and diverse representation. The way that I, as a fan, was involved in developing Aloy’s NHOP reinforces the active role of several agents in forming the assemblage. Thus, this case has provided insight into the need to distinguish between a nonhuman entity and its online persona in a similar manner to how we differentiate between text and paratext, and ourselves and our online personas.

Virtual photography emerges as a distinct practice within gaming media, rooted in traditional photography yet uniquely adapted to digital environments. The artistic practice of remediating Aloy’s in-game character in the collective constitution of her online persona exemplifies the intertextual, intercommunicative and paratextual nature of gaming cultures

and NHOPs. Through virtual photography, fans like Jalhvir contribute to the collective assemblage of Aloy's NHOP, reinforcing how player-generated content extends and enriches the core gaming experience. Jalhvir's queering of Aloy's NHOP, captured and disseminated through virtual photography, demonstrates how fans actively participate in shaping character narratives beyond developer intentions. Thus, the case study exemplifies the evolving interaction between fan discourse and game developers, and the crucial role gamers play in pushing for diverse representation.

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8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

9 APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Full size visualisation of the research design for this article, adapted from Connell and Moore (2023).

