

Assembling a Fictive Personality

An Analysis of VTubing as a Transformative Practice

Tony Pellicone (tony.pellicone@falmouth.ac.uk)
Falmouth University Games Academy

PUBLIC



Introduction and Background

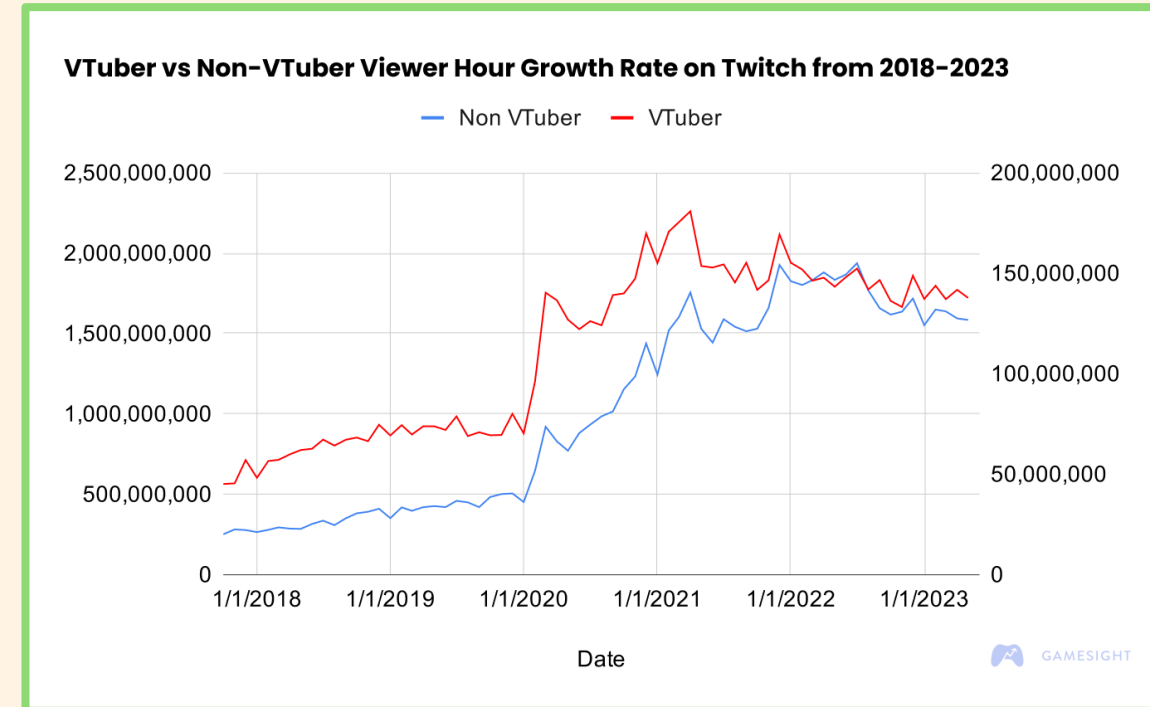
- Streaming is increasing in popularity as a form of entertainment and self-expression.
- Streaming is also a central aspect of modern game culture.
- VTubing is a form of streaming that uses a virtual avatar to represent the broadcaster.



Credit: @korisu_1214 (Twitter), <https://booth.pm/en/items/4719581>

Introduction and Background

- Originated from virtual performer Kizuna AI to describe a “Virtual Youtuber”. Exploded in popularity with studios like Hololive during the pandemic.
- Many of the most popular VTubers are supported by agencies that provide management, technical support, and control branding and image.
- Over the past four years there has also been a rise in independent VTubing as the streams have gained popularity and consumer grade technology has become widely available.



Introduction and Background

The screenshot shows a Twitch stream interface. The main video area displays a character with a yellow body, a black top hat, and a red tie, set against a game world background. The stream title is "ExampleDog Example VTuber Stream!" and the game being played is "The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom". The chat on the right shows several messages from viewers, including "Chatter1 Redeemed Silly Hat 500", "Chatter1: omg check out the new hat", "Chatter2: already made new fan art in the discord lmao", "Chatter3: reminds me of the hat in time streams", and "Chatter1: lol yes!!!". The stream is categorized as "Cozy", "Silly", "Vtuber", and "ENVtuber". A "LIVE" badge is visible in the bottom left corner of the video area. A "Send a message" input field is at the bottom right of the chat area.

Persistent Branding with Persona

Avatar is Interactive and Responsive

Community is Involved in Creation

PUBLIC

(For a useful technical breakdown see Ferreira et al. 2022)

Introduction and Background

- This mix of technology and community is compelling and represents a transformation of how streamers interact with their audiences.
- This presentation reports on preliminary findings from early stages of field work conducted in support forums for VTubing and analysis of live streams.
- Feeds into an ongoing research project about VTubing, ties into existing theory on VTubing, and poses questions for future work.

Related Work

Streaming games on Twitch is a social practice that is influenced by the streamer's relationship to game culture, and the identity they wish to put forward on their stream.

(Anderson, 2017; Gray, 2017; Pellicone & Ahn, 2017; Taylor, 2018)

The avatars that VTubers adopt are often drawn from a mixture of personal interests and imagery and texts of fan communities.

(Chen, 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Wan & Lu, 2023)

The creation of an avatar is an act of trying to capture an authentic personality, but also gives the ability to play with identity and exaggerate certain elements.

(Bredikhina & Giard, 2022; Bredkhina, 2020; Lu et al., 2021; Wan & Lu, 2023)

Fantastic and fictional elements of the avatar add interest to viewers, since it allows for a backstory that would seem out of place for a face-cam streamer, and instant collaborations and broader storylines among communities of streamers.

(Choudry et al., 2022; Bredikhina & Giard, 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Wan & Lu, 2023)

The parasocial elements that develop through streamer-viewer relationships are hypothesized to be amplified by the mediating influence of an animated avatar.

(Choudry et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2022)

Related Work

Gaps in current literature:

- Has focused largely on studio-supported VTubers (e.g. Ferreria et al., 2022).
- Has also focused largely on established VTubers.
- Smaller (less than 200 concurrent viewers) Independent VTubers seem to have unique circumstances that warrant study, especially since this has been a source of growth in the overall market for VTubing.

Emerging Research Questions:

- **What are the practical dimensions of creating and maintaining an independent VTuber stream?**
- How does the community support the practice of VTubing for independent creators.
- How does the fictive personality that a VTuber has chosen interact with their practice of streaming.

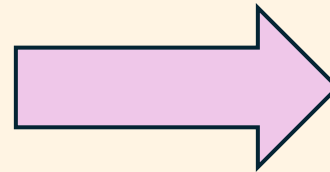
Methods and Study Design

Stage 1: Field Research

Goals: build understanding of practice, develop initial codes and sensitizing concepts, construct data collection for Stage 2.

Methods:

- Analysis of one month of posts to a support forum for VTubers.
 - Fieldnotes collected through daily reading of the forum
 - About 3,000 archived posts for reference
 - Codes developed iteratively
- Supported by digital fieldwork with live streams & goal of identifying potential participants.



Stage 2: Embedded Ethnographic Research

Goals: integration with 3 or 4 VTuber communities to watch streams, hang out in community, and then do semi-structured interviews

Methods:

- Focusing on small (less than 200 concurrent viewers average) independent VTubers.
- Interview protocols informed by stage 1.
- Combining data across fieldnotes and interviews.
- Interviewing both broadcasters and community members.

Emergent Themes

The Avatar and Debut

Broadcasters put a lot of thought and effort into picking a personality that matches with what they want to convey on stream. Streamers tend to solidify this in a “debut” stream, where they show off their model and their concept in a more formalized event. There are a wide variety of attitudes towards the fictional elements of the model – also sometimes referred to as “lore”.

“I officially debuted today since becoming a vtuber about four years ago. I'm so glad I was able to debut after all this time with a model I've been dreaming about all these years! I also hit 250 followers on Twitch and 50 subs on YouTube since I became a content creator about 8 years ago!”

P1

PUBLIC

Emergent Themes

The Avatar and Debut

Broadcasters put a lot of thought and effort into picking a personality that matches with what they want to convey on stream. Streamers tend to solidify this in a “debut” stream, where they show off their model and their concept in a more formalized event. There are a wide variety of attitudes towards the fictional elements of the model – also sometimes referred to as “lore”.

“Hi Space cadets! I’m Zix, an energetic, cute, silly and bubbly new vtuber from outer space. I hope you consider following me on my socials and join me on my debut stream!! ... Its hard work as I'm currently a one person show, and doing all this art, posting, animating, software engineering and business managing is quite the activity so any support really helps me keep this up!”

Emergent Themes

The Avatar and Debut

Broadcasters put a lot of thought and effort into picking a personality that matches with what they want to convey on stream. Streamers tend to solidify this in a “debut” stream, where they show off their model and their concept in a more formalized event. There are a wide variety of attitudes towards the fictional elements of the model – also sometimes referred to as “lore”.

Replies from a thread about lore...

“I’m a shark space marine from the 40k universe. I’m a librarian who plays ‘old’ games from the 21 century in order to attract a crowd.”

P3

“My character was a random guy who was kidnapped by an unknown entity making me into this super human creature. My entire body and face is covered in clothing from whatever style was popular at the time, as with all these modifications my perception time as my body was trying to realise what happened to it. ... By the time it was complete, I was the only human left alive besides any genetic code we saved. Realizing I was the main reason why Humanity was able to build a ring and knowing that humanity can restart, my goal becomes to create an entire generation born and raised on this megastructure 1/10 the size of the Galaxy.”

P4 PUBLIC

“Idk what lore to give mine honestly I’m still surprised you're supposed to give lore”

P5

Emergent Themes

Finding Community

Streamers on this forum also seemed to realize that this was a very competitive market. There was a lot of attention devoted to finding a community that would match their character, give a sense of fulfillment in streaming, while also distinguishing them from other broadcasters.

"You don't *need* any of that stuff, but you should prepare yourself for the possibility that no one will watch you in the beginning. It takes awhile to find people who will watch and stick around, to be honest. You may have 0-1 viewers for a looong time, and that's totally normal. Frustrating, but normal."

P6

PUBLIC

Emergent Themes

Finding Community

Streamers on this forum also seemed to realized that this was a very competitive market. There was a lot of attention devoted to finding a community that would match their character, give a sense of fulfilment in streaming, while also distinguishing them from other broadcasters.

"[on using social sites for networking] To add insult to this injury I was hoping that using twitter (I refuse to call it X) to find people to collab with, but every time I get a follower that looks like a vtuber it says things like 'art commissions now open' or "I make high tier vtuber models" or such and any attempt to talk with them is just them asking me to look at their portfolio and 'did you know I have a 50% off sale?!'"

P8

Emergent Themes

Assembling Personality

VTubers must bring together a number of different technologies to convey the personality that they want to represent, and to attract the audience that they want to foster. This includes physical technologies like face and motion tracking, aesthetic elements beyond the model (such as emotes and stream overlays), and interactive elements such as point redeems and props.

“Hi guys! I'm Momo and I'm just starting to stream on twitch. This is my design and I'm super excited to have her in the works but it'll take a couple months for the art alone then she'll need to be rigged. In the meantime is it better to just use a premade model? Should I get one off Etsy? I'm not sure what's normal.”

P11

“While I'm a pngtuber I do wish to get a VTuber model ... I just want something to be proud of.” [Another poster asks why they don't use a 3D model] “I do want a 3D model! However it is expensive to get a quality one. ... my current Lore set up is that I'm a sloth person and I wanted to have something that represented that ... Once I have enough money I will have a 3D version of my professor sloth made.”

PUBLIC

P12

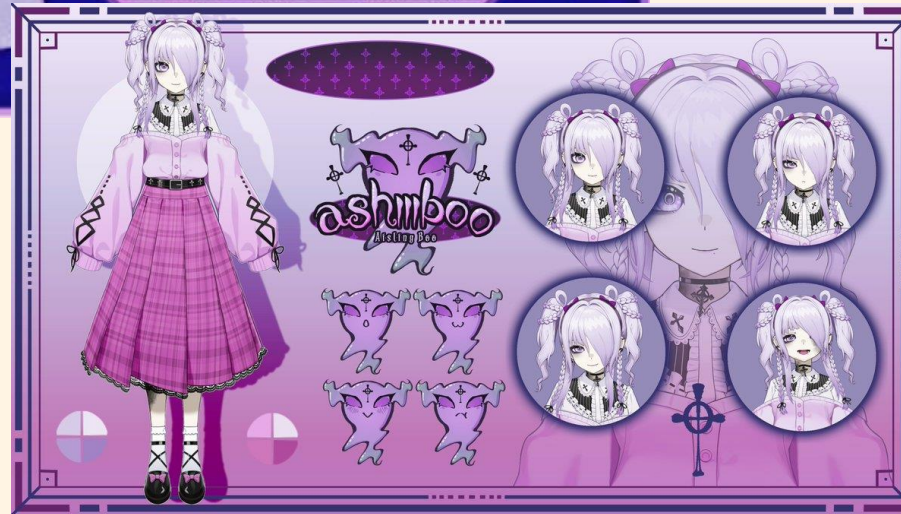
Emergent Themes



Used with permission of AshiiiBoo. @Ashiiiboo on twitch, and
AshiiiBoo_VT on twitter.

PUBLIC

Emergent Themes



Used with permission of AshiiiBoo. @Ashiiiboo on twitch, and
AshiiiBoo_VT on twitter.

PUBLIC

Discussion

“So about a year ago I was streaming fairly often until I had to go and get a surgical procedure which ended up required a lot of recovery time. I want to get back into it but I'm a bit self-conscious ... I feel like vtubing would give me the opportunity to express myself better at least until I'm ready to go back on cam or just as a regular alternative on my channel.”

P13

Discussion

- VTubing allows for a great deal of expression between the fictive personality, the technical artefact, and the streamer.
- However, putting together a stream that matches the broadcaster's goals can be both expensive and complex.
- VTubing is also playful and interactive with the audience. Finding a community that supports the broadcaster's goal is central to the practice, and also shows the potential to support the larger practice through fan production.

Conclusions & Next Steps

- What are the practical dimensions of creating and maintaining an independent VTuber stream?
- **How does the community support the practice of VTubing for independent creators.**
- **How does the fictive personality that a VTuber has chosen interact with their practice of streaming.**

Thank you!

Works Cited

1. An. (2023, August 8). The Rise of VTubers 2023: Virtual Creators in the Streaming Space. *Gamesight*. <https://blog.gamesight.io/vtuber/>
2. Anderson, S. (2017). Watching people is not a game: Interactive online corporeality, Twitch.tv, and videogame streams. *Games Studies*, 17(1).
3. Bredikhina (2020). Designing identity in VTuber era. Proceedings of Laval Virtual VRIC ConVRgence, 182-184.
4. Bredikhina & Giard (2022). Becoming a Virtual Cutie: Digital Cross-Dressing in Japan. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 28(6), 1643–1661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221074812>
5. Chen, J. (2020). The vtuber takeover of 2020. *Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/2020/11/30/21726800/holive-vtuber-projekt-melody-kizuna-ai-calliope-mori-vshojo-youtube-earnings>
6. Choudhry, A., Han, J., Xu, X., & Huang, Y. (2022). “I Felt a Little Crazy Following a ‘Doll’”: Investigating Real Influence of Virtual Influencers on Their Followers. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6(GROUP), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3492862>
7. Ferreira, J. C. V., Regis, R. D. D., Gonçalves, P., Diniz, G. R., & Tavares, V. P. D. S. C. (2022). VTuber concept review: The new frontier of virtual entertainment. *Proceedings of the 24th Symposium on Virtual and Augmented Reality*, 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3604479.3604523>
8. Gray, K. (2017). “They’re just too urban”: Black gamers streaming on Twitch. In J. Daniels, K. Gregory, & T. M. Cottom (Eds.), *Digital sociologies* (pp. 351–364). Policy Press.
9. Lu, Z., Shen, C., Li, J., Shen, H., & Wigdor, D. (2021). More Kawaii than a Real-Person Live Streamer: Understanding How the Otaku Community Engages with and Perceives Virtual YouTubers. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445660>
10. Pellicone, A. J., & Ahn, J. (2017). The game of performing play: Understanding streaming as cultural production. *CHI ’17 Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 4863–4874. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025854>
11. Stein, J.-P., Linda Breves, P., & Anders, N. (2022). Parasocial interactions with real and virtual influencers: The role of perceived similarity and human-likeness. *New Media & Society*, 146144482211029. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221102900>
12. Taylor, T. L. (2018). *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Princeton University Press.
13. Wan, Q., & Lu, Z. (2023). *Investigating VTubing as a Reconstruction of Streamer Self-Presentation: Identity, Performance, and Gender* (No. arXiv:2307.11025). arXiv. <http://arxiv.org/abs/2307.11025>

Emergent Themes

Assembling Personality

VTubers must bring together a number of different technologies to convey the personality that they want to represent, and to attract the audience that they want to foster. This includes physical technologies like face and motion tracking, aesthetic elements beyond the model (such as emotes and stream overlays), and interactive elements such as point redeems and props.

“[I commissioned an artist for my model] ... I was wondering if i commission them again in the future for an outfit would they prioritize me more than someone else who doesn't have a model? Just a thought, and should they? This is more a question for live2d artists.”

P10

Emergent Themes

Finding Community

Streamers on this forum also seemed to realize that this was a very competitive market. There was a lot of attention devoted to finding a community that would match their character, give a sense of fulfillment in streaming, while also distinguishing them from other broadcasters.

“[My favorite part of Vtubing is...] making small connections with viewers, honestly. I’m not very big so when I see new viewers, I’m able to remember them. I had another streamer stop by my stream (playing Spyro) and they helped me with a puzzle I was stuck on. I was able to see them stream a few days later (also playing Spyro) and they were excited to see me pop in and were asking me for advice on how to solve the puzzles they were stuck on. It’s my favorite interaction so far :)”

P9

PUBLIC