

'A political statement, whether you understand that or not': Inclusive Gender Expression in Avatar Customization

Yisong Han

Monash University
900 Dandenong Rd
Caulfield East, VIC, 3145
yisong.han@monash.edu

Xavier Ho

Monash University
900 Dandenong Rd
Caulfield East, VIC, 3145
xavier.ho@monash.edu

Keywords

gender expression, avatar customization, gender inclusivity

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive gender expression and exploration in avatars is being increasingly studied (Morgan et al. 2020; Whitehouse et al. 2023). In a recent qualitative study with 10 non-binary participants, Koscienza (2023) examined the gender expression strategies for players of online games. In the research, Koscienza pointed out:

“For the non-binary and non-transitioning players I interviewed, however, gender presentation only got easier when game developers included more options for (un)gendered virtual self-expression, or decoupled avatar customization options from binary gender categories.”

This promotes our contemplation: is “decoupling” customization options from avatar¹ gender and offering more options enough to support more inclusive gender expression? Using the prominent game *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) as an example, although the game developer CD Projekt Red advertised a departure from binary gender, the customization system seems to continually reinforce a binary gender framework. One such detail is that choosing the avatar voice (male or female) determines the avatar pronoun at the start of the game. “[*Cyberpunk 2077*] made such a big fuss about, like, oh, the genital customization, but we're tying gender to voice,” one of the participants (non-binary, US) we interviewed stated, “that’s a political statement, whether you understand that or not.”

While contemporary games are gradually becoming more inclusive (Shaw 2017), is there a risk that avatar customization in videogames falls into the trap of being “window dressing”? Behind these “menu-driven” options, how do players navigate the realms of compromise? Chang (2017) posed this perspective on queerness in videogames:

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

“...queerness in games is still largely window dressing, menu-driven identities (to quote Lisa Nakamura), a yes-or-no, date-him-or-her, have-sex-with-man-or-woman choice, which replicates the rather limited binary of hetero or homo, gay or straight, and even more insidiously the conservative belief that sexuality is a simple choice.”

Therefore, we ask the question: how do players approach gender expression that is (not just feels) inclusive to them through avatar customization systems?

To address this research question, this study investigates whether and how avatar customization options entangle in the expressions of players. Through semi-structured interviews and qualitative research involving 20 gender diverse² and cisgender players, we aim to provoke re-thinking of gender inclusivity within avatar customization.

Among the 20 interviews, certain options were mentioned more frequently: hairstyle, voice, and clothing, aligning with prior research (Freeman et al. 2022; Geraci & Geraci 2013). Avatar name, height, and skin color also exerted a substantial impact on avatar gender expression. The experiences and self-expression implied by these options are significant to gender expression.

Through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, this research further reveals that the way of customization options engagement with gender expression primarily revolves around three themes:

- **Serving/Subverting Gender Norms.** Players would express their gender through the embedded gender norms within the options, but they may also resist such gender stereotypes and use them to defy societal gender expectations and express their own gender identity. “... in China, people really, really like big eyes and double eyelids. So, when a woman appears with big eyes and double eyelids, we feel that it has a very obvious feminine quality... But most of the ones I would have created, their eyes are narrower and then it's not double eyelids... and then everyone is just like, wow, she must be more of a masculine person.” (Cisgender woman, China)
- **Symbolizing Self-identity.** Avatar choices rely on players' real-life experiences and characteristics, which the customization options may represent. These options serve as a canvas for reflecting these experiences. “I suppose having the correct skin tone and having a similar haircut are one of the main factors for me... I think those things are expressions of myself... I think that is a very important aspect of who I am.” (Non-binary, America)
- **Gender Exploration and Experimentation.** Players “play with gender” and continuously adjust and test their gender expression within the game world. This ongoing exploration sometimes influences their real-world perceptions and understanding of their gender identities. “I find that something that most games give me the option for. So being able to set that to something and then everyone in the game addresses you by that name, they address you by your character's gender identity... So that was definitely a really important tool for exploring identity as well, I think.” (Transgender woman, Canada)

During the presentation, we will present the initial findings of this research and discuss these three themes in-depth. Our presentation will integrate Chang's reflections on Queergaming to explore the systemic gender norms, and give nuance to

inclusive design of the avatar customization. We invite future scholars to reflect: what perspectives and considerations can developers take to support inclusive gender expression and exploration in avatar customization?

BIO

Yisong Han is a PhD Candidate at Monash University Art, Design and Architecture (MADA). His dissertation focuses on the gender affordance of the avatar customization in videogames with a perspective beyond binary gender.

Xavier Ho is Lecturer in Interaction Design at Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA) and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Centre (SSSHARC).

ENDNOTES

¹ The term *avatar* in this research adopts the distinction between characters and avatars as proposed by Shaw (2015, pp 102-103). Avatars symbolize the player's in-game embodiment, allowing for customization and a sense of self-representation, whereas characters like Lara Croft or Mario are entities that players control. The focus of this research lies in the creation system, highlighting the crucial role of player self-representation, and the interviews also primarily revolved around discussions related to customization. Although participants often used the terms 'avatar' and 'character' interchangeably, this may be attributed to their lack of a clear differentiation between these terms.

² This study inquired about participants' gender identities, which, based on their self-reports, encompassed a range of gender identities, including Transgender, Non-binary, Gender-fluid, Gender-apatetic, and a category between Non-binary and Female (closer to Female).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CD Projekt RED. 2020. *Cyberpunk 2077*. CD Projekt.
- Chang, E. Y. 2017. Queergaming. *Queer game studies*, 17.
- Freeman, G., Maloney, D., Acena, D., & Barwulor, C. 2022. (Re) discovering the physical body online: Strategies and challenges to approach non-cisgender identity in social Virtual Reality. In *Proceedings of the 2022 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 1-15).
- Geraci, R. M., & Geraci, J. L. 2013. Virtual gender: How men and women use videogame bodies. *Journal of gaming & virtual worlds*, 5(3), 329-348.
- Koscieszka, A. J. 2023. Doing gender in game spaces: Transgender and non-binary players' gender signaling strategies in online games. *New Media & Society*, 14614448231168107.
- Morgan, H., O'donovan, A., Almeida, R., Lin, A., & Perry, Y. 2020. The role of the avatar in gaming for trans and gender diverse young people. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(22), 8617.
- Shaw, A. 2015. *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Shaw, A. 2017. What's next?: the LGBTQ video game archive. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(1), 88-94.
- Whitehouse, K., Hitchens, M., & Matthews, N. 2023. Trans* and gender diverse players: Avatars and gender-alignment. *Entertainment Computing*, 47, 100584.