

Unlocking Gender Inclusivity: Exploring Developer Perspectives on Avatar Customization

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Keywords

avatar customization, inclusivity, diversity, industry practitioner, gender expression

INTRODUCTION

At Gamescom 2024, Capcom announced a major change to the armor system in *Monster Hunter Wilds*¹ and removed gender divisions in armor design. Male avatars previously wore bulky, "masculine" armor, and female avatars wore more revealing or skirted designs. Players welcomed this change. A post on Reddit titled "WE DEFEATED GENDER" gained 12,000 upvotes². Though it seemed *Monster Hunter Wilds* made strides in gender inclusivity, binary gender frameworks remain prevalent in many avatar customization systems (Consalvo & Harper 2009). In turn, their prevalence limited virtual bodies players seek to create (Shaw 2015). The trickle-down effect reinforces gender stereotypes in video games. Gender expressions that transcend traditional norms are excluded.

Avatar customization plays a major role to support gender exploration (McKenna et al. 2024; Morgan et al. 2020). While player experiences have been well-documented (see Han & Ho 2024; Kosciesza 2023; Whitehouse et al. 2023), less attention has been given to the practical difficulties developers encounter. Majority of the literature reports on how players engage with avatar customization and the potential it holds for challenging traditional gender norms. Despite these important contributions, a gap remains regarding the perspectives of game developers, particularly in relation to the challenges and considerations they face when enhancing gender inclusivity in avatar systems.

To address this gap, the research draws from semi-structured interviews with ten game industry practitioner³ (see Table 1) to investigate the following research question: *What specific challenges and constraints do game developers face when enhancing gender inclusivity in avatar customization?* By focusing on the perspectives of industry practitioners, I seek to offer a more comprehensive view into factors that influence the development of inclusive design. The findings complement existing player-centered research and provide practical insights for future game design.

Participant	Gender Identity	Job Title	Culture Heritage	Years of Experience
D1	Female	Motion Graphic Artist	Chinese	4
D2	Male	Concept Artist	Asian	9
D3	Transgender Female	Narrative Content Designer	Aboriginal Australian, Celtic	5.5
D4	Female	User Researcher	Chinese	4
D5	Non-binary	Narrative Designer	German and Spanish	8
D6	Trans/Non-binary	Programmer	Australian	10
D7	Non-binary	Programmer	Russian (not associate with Russian culture a lot)	10
D8	Male	QA Tester	Chinese	5
D9	Male	Game Designer	Chinese	4
D10	Female	Narrative Director	Slovak/White Australian	11

Table 1. Self-reported Demographic Information of Interviewees

Through a qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, I identified four key factors that influence developers' efforts to enhance gender inclusivity. They are:

- **Cross-departmental collaboration:** Game development often relies on teamwork. Any design changes typically require communication and coordination across multiple departments. Continuing with an existing customization framework is often seen as a less risky and more efficient option compared to innovating new designs (Thominet 2021). Practitioners expressed concerns that design changes could lead to increased workload and unexpected technical issues or bugs.
- **Team diversity and inclusion⁴:** Practitioners emphasize that the voices and decision-making authority of gender-diverse team members greatly influence a project's understanding of gender issues and its ability to promote inclusive design. As Vedres and Vásárhelyi (2023) argue, team diversity alone does not lead to positive outcomes, unless these diverse members are granted opportunities to participate in core development and unleash creative potential through teamwork. If gender-diverse members are excluded from key decision-making, efforts toward inclusive change in a game project are significantly weakened.
- **Market demands:** Practitioners highlighted market demands during the game development process. Gender-diverse designs face resistance from players as gender stereotypes and discrimination persist (Fron et al. 2007; Ruberg 2019). Inclusive design decisions are often compelled to compromise in favor of commercial interests. Yet, practitioners questioned whether early market research truly reflects the diverse needs of players. One user researcher noted that in early development-stage surveys, questions about gender were limited to "male" or "female." Early surveys that exclude players who do not fit within the binary structure have a follow-on effect on inclusive design.

- **Socio-cultural environment:** Interactions between socio-cultural norms and game development are frequently mentioned. In Western contexts, in particular the U.S. and Australia, developers face fewer external constraints and have more freedom in implementing inclusive design. In contrast, developers encounter greater challenges in societies with more conservative gender norms. For example, a game designer from China mentioned that games released in China must pass government review, compelling companies to follow more conservative gender norms in their design, or else risking being banned due to player reports.

Despite these factors, many industry practitioners still view gender inclusivity in avatar customization as an attainable goal. In the interviews, while some non-technical practitioners express concerns about perceived technical limitations, nearly all programmers and testers emphasize that the ease of implementation depends on whether inclusive design is incorporated early in the development process, as later adjustments increase costs significantly.

This study examines the challenges developers face in enhancing gender inclusivity. The findings suggest future game development teams should assemble diverse teams, ensure gender-diverse voices are actively involved in decision-making, and integrate inclusive design concepts early in development. More research with game industry practitioners is still needed to fill the gap of inclusive avatar customization systems.

BIO

Yisong Han is a PhD Candidate at Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA). His PhD research, awarded the Monash Graduate Scholarship (MGS), focuses on the gender affordance of avatar customization in video games, and aims to create a dialogue exploring potential gaps in needs and perspectives between game developers and players.

ENDNOTES

1 *Monster Hunter Wilds*, developed by Capcom, is an upcoming game that, as of the time of writing, has not yet been released. The game is scheduled for release on February 28, 2025.

2 https://www.reddit.com/r/MonsterHunter/comments/1exp6lv/we_defeated_gender/

3 In this study, I use the term *practitioner* to emphasize that these game developers occupy various roles and engage in diverse tasks within their projects. This means they approach issues with differing perspectives and understandings, shaped by their distinct professional responsibilities. Such varied backgrounds provide them with unique insights into gender inclusivity in game design and the associated challenges.

4 I adopt the definition of *inclusion* from the research of Vedres & Vásárhelyi (2023), which outlines inclusion through three dimensions: mixing, bonding, and incorporating. Mixing refers to the absence of segmentation within a team, allowing for diverse exchanges across gender lines; bonding captures the strength of ties between different gender groups, fostering trust and efficient communication; and incorporating focuses on the representation of members in the core of the team, promoting their influence in decision-making and leadership.

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