

Developer Agency in Navigating Gender-Inclusive Design: Insights from Avatar Customization

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INTRODUCTION

Avatar customization is increasingly acknowledged as a critical site for gender expression and exploration in videogames (Han & Ho 2024; McKenna et al. 2022). In recent years, research has paid growing attention to the challenge of implementing gender-inclusive design within these systems. Existing work has identified a range of factors shaping developers' practices, such as limited resources, market logics, sociocultural environment (Han 2025), and external feedback (Kulik et al., 2021). However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the constraints shaping development, they often leave underexplored how developers themselves exercise agency in navigating and responding to these conditions.

Indeed, developers continuously negotiate with these intersecting factors throughout the entire development process. As Berg Marklund et al. (2019, 193) observe, although game development teams attempt to follow prescribed development processes, "ad-hoc development driven by subjective experience requirements is the most prevalent praxis across the industry" in reality. Likewise, Walfisz et al. (2006, 489) characterize decision-making in game development as "muddling through," with development direction and key decisions being continuously adjusted in response to actual progress. These observations suggest that, during the development, game developers actively work through overlapping and evolving structural conditions, making decisions that reshape both problems and solutions over time.

Thus, this research reframes the discussion by centering on developer agency, examining how developers negotiate the complexities of gender-inclusive design under constraint conditions. It draws on ten semi-structured interviews with developers of diverse roles, gender identities, and cultural backgrounds¹. Through multiple rounds of coding in NVivo 15, the interview transcripts were systematically examined to identify recurring categories and refine them into four key themes:

- **Early-Stage Planning:** developers emphasized that technical and financial barriers become much harder to overcome later in production. By integrating inclusive features into the design pipeline from the outset, they could minimize costs and avoid major rework. Early planning not only prevented technical obstacles but also generated reusable strategies for future projects.

- **Proactive Team Dialogues:** through discussions, developers coordinated across teams and departments, negotiated scope, and built consensus. Although time-consuming, these discussions facilitated creative exchange and smoothed workflow, ensuring that inclusivity remained on the agenda throughout development.
- **Fostering Team Culture:** developers highlighted the importance of cultivating an open, respectful, and diverse team culture. Diversity alone was insufficient unless paired with inclusive practices that enabled all members to voice concerns and contribute to design decisions (Vedres and Vásárhelyi 2023). In such environments, developers reported renewed motivation and greater capacity to advocate for inclusive change.
- **Persuading Leadership:** developers stressed that leadership approval was decisive for resource allocation and the prioritization of inclusive design goals. Developers often had to frame inclusivity as a business case, carefully tailoring their arguments to align with managerial or investor concerns. Persuasion was thus a crucial strategy for transforming inclusive ideas into actionable development tasks.

These findings resonate with broader critiques of how knowledges and power operate in the games industry. Existing studies indicate that the industry has long been regarded as market-driven (Keogh 2019), with design decisions often dependent on commercial data analysis (Seif El-Nasr & Kleinman 2020). Developers must therefore frame inclusivity not simply as a design principle but as a business case, using reports and analytics to persuade leadership. As Foucault (1980) emphasizes, dominant knowledge regimes often constitute themselves as “objective” and “neutral” authorities through formalized, systematized practices. In the process of knowledge production, the needs, experiences and voices of gender-diverse players become “subjugated knowledges”², while the dominant knowledge regime continuously reinforces binary gender norms to maintain its own legitimacy and power.

However, the four key themes identified in this study reveal an “insurrection” of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980). The reemergence and collective voicing of those knowledges that have been marginalized or obscured is the very impetus for critical practice. In other words, developers are not merely passive recipients; instead, they actively intervene within this dynamic network and employ strategic actions. In doing so, game developers thus have great potential to contest and reshape existing power structures to provide critical momentum for the implementation of gender-inclusive design.

BIO

Yisong Han is a PhD candidate at Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA) at Monash University. Han’s research focuses on gender diversity and inclusion in videogame avatar customization, and his recent work appears in *Games and Culture*. He serves as Student Officer of DiGRA for the 2025–2027 term.

ENDNOTES

1 Full demographic information of interviewees is provided in Han (2025).

2 I draw on Michel Foucault’s (1980) concept of “subjugated knowledges.” Foucault explains that this concept has two dimensions: on the one hand, it refers to “those

blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory”; on the other, it points to knowledges that were considered “disqualified” and “located low down on the hierarchy” (1980, 81–82). Applied to game development, I use this concept to reflect on the knowledges of “what players like/care about/need,” and to examine why these knowledges are favored in decision-making.

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