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<p style="text-align:center">Trans Inclusivity in Character Creation: Representation or Fetishization?</p>

Video game character creators have often been a place of gender expression. In older games, gendered options did not exist at all and you could only play as a male character in RPGs. With better character creators came the option to pick your gender, resulting in gender locked hairstyles and dialogue options. Now, big budget studios brag about their progressive character creators, many of which end up missing the mark of trans inclusivity. Are these trans inclusive character creators good representation, fetishization, or a strange mixture of both?

Video game character creators are of interest particularly because of their importance to the trans community. Even with more limited character creators in the past, trans people have often been able to explore their gender identity through creating characters in video games. As graphics capabilities have advanced, more and more control is given to character creators, but because of white cisheteronormativity, certain aspects of character creation have had more development than others. There is extreme control over cheekbone size, but non white hairstyles are few and far between. Most character creators have only just begun to not lock character hairstyles recently, and a character creator that does not lock body types is newsworthy.

So, why is representation in character creation so important? In an article from 2014, Jessica Janiuk said that "many of us that are trans identified or are questioning our gender identity find solace in the virtual world. Games… that allow character creation with gender choice give us the opportunity to be seen as and interact with the world as the gender to which

we identify. That experience can provide a sense of peace from the dysphoria we experience throughout our day-to-day lives. That sense of harmony, and contentment provided by the virtual world by alleviating that gender dysphoria for a brief time helps us to better understand ourselves. Who knew that gaming could help such amazing personal growth?"(Janiuk) This sentiment is echoed by a large number of trans people. As an example, the game Fallout: New Vegas has become a meme amongst trans women because of its popularity within the community. According to Phillip Hamilton,

> Whether on Instagram, Facebook or Reddit boards like /r/transgamers and /r/falloutnewvegas, you don't have to search too hard to find memes poking fun at the idea that trans people love the game. Some of the most common memes make jokes about cis people buying the game in 2010, then re-purchasing it in 2021 after transitioning. A meme from the Facebook page Transgender Dysphoria Shitposting offers up a 'trans woman starter pack' with every single image labeled 'playing Fallout New Vegas.' Another, posted that same year to 8-Bit Communism, shows a trans cat girl character captioned, 'yeah i play Fallout: New Vegas, how'd you know?' implying that if you're trans, you like Fallout: New Vegas."(Hamilton)

The RPG genre and other games with character creators are as a whole very popular with transgender audiences.

This goes beyond the accounts of trans women, as research shows that gender options in video games are vitally important to gender exploration and identity forming. According to Sabine Trepte and Leonard Reinecke from the University of Hamburg, Germany:

> In previous research, players gave preference to similar avatars in terms of gender role, outward appearance, and even biological sex (Hsu, Lee, & Wu, 2005; Rymaszewski et

al., 2007; Trepte, Reinecke, & Behr, 2009). Hsu et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative

study with 16 frequent buyers of computer games. Participants assigned 28 different

"Pac-Man" games to three groups in terms of perceived fun, and afterward they

compared games from different groups according to design features. Hsu et al. (2005)

reported that players enjoyed games with characters similar to their own more than games

with dissimilar characters. A preference for same-sex avatars can also be found for virtual

environments such as Second Life. Research on users' gender preference in Second Life

has shown that 4% of females chose to play a male character and 14% of men chose a

female character. 82% of users remained with their real world gender (Rymaszewski et

al., 2007)."(Trepte 171-172)

Also, according to a research paper titled "The Impacts of Virtual Reality Avatar Creation and

Embodiment on Transgender and Genderqueer Individuals in Games", "as part of a qualitative

study, survey data from 29 individuals and interview data from 7 of those individuals were

analyzed using the emergent method of grounded theory analysis. The data suggest that ACI VR

experiences that give interactors creative agency, greater gender diversity, and the opportunity to

be embodied in mundane and gender-affirming situations are dysphoria relieving and euphoria

inducing."(Reyes 1) In other words, gender representation in video games can be used as a tool

to treat gender dysphoria in trans players. It is a vitally important form of representation that

needs to be advocated for.

In addition, the video game medium has a history of not having good representation, and

in fact actively being bigoted towards transgender people. Nicole Pero in the GREAT Day

Symposium in 2017 said that "for players who aren't white, cisgender male. able bodied,

straight, etc., the world of video games seems to exclude them entirely…Trans people have to

deal with absurd representations like Nintendo's Birdo and Street Fighter's Poison, the last of which was only included as trans in the game because U.S. audiences weren't interested in hitting/fighting "women," somehow implying that hitting/fighting a trans woman isn't fighting a 'real' woman"(Pero 57). Outside of low budget indie games, transgender characters are still few and far between.

One way of adding more gender inclusivity to the video game character creator is a gender "slider." According to Nicole Pero, "It is no coincidence that the slider takes the form of a spectrum—similar to the way feminists think of gender as more of a spectrum than a binary, where people can exist anywhere on the spectrum or even outside it, sliders in video games allow a spectrum of identities into the world of the game,"(Pero). One AAA game that uses a slider for gender is Dark Souls, which has a slider from Masculine to Feminine. Sliders are a staple of most character creators, and are often used for really specific aspects of your character model like nose angle or cheekbone depth. By turning body type into a spectrum, you can encompass a lot of different trans bodies. A masculine to feminine slider is better than just picking Boy A, B, or C, but it still excludes a lot of gender expressions and identities. Perhaps by having all of the aspects of a character's body that would be coded by the slider be their own sliders, a game could truly allow the player to represent themself without having to say that they are a certain gender, or that they are "masculine" or "feminine."

However, as the example of *Cyberpunk 2077,* which does have inclusive sliders and body options, shows, the ability to make a character have a certain body type needs to coexist with a way for that choice to not be rendered null by the gameplay or the way your character is addressed. As transgender people are getting more and more visibility in the public consciousness and have been getting more and more politicized, video game companies have

seen the desire for more accessible character creators as a way to market their games. One notable example of this is CD Projeckt Red's 2020 game *Cyberpunk 2077*. Prior to announcing their character creator, *Cyberpunk 2077* had a large amount of transgender related controversy. According to Kotaku,

> "CD Projekt Red and associated CD Projekt entities like GOG have previously come under fire for social media faux-pas involving trans people. Last August, the official Cyberpunk 2077 Twitter account made a joke about assuming someone's gender, perceived to be mocking people's self-identification… The studio later apologized. In October, the GOG Twitter account appropriated the hashtag #WontBeErased to talk about their catalog of computer games. The hashtag' originated as a way to raise awareness of a Trump administration memo about narrowing the legal definition of "sex" in federal law." (Alexandra)

Their biggest scandal involved an extremely sexualized poster of a trans woman in the game that was revealed in an NVidia article about Ray Tracing (Alexandra). The creator, in response to this, said that the game was critiquing the oversexualization of trans women and that the game would have a trans positive character creator.

> Tomaskiewicz: Of course. It's a very sensitive and important subject I believe. We have put a lot of thought into this. One of the things we want to do in the final game (which we couldn't show in the demo yet, because as you mentioned it's a work in progress) is to give the players as many options of customization in the beginning of the game as we can. For example, we want to do this thing where, as you create your character, after you choose the body type, you can, for example, use physical traits as you build your face that could be assigned to a man or a woman.

Gamasutra: Or nonbinary?

Tomaskiewicz: Or nonbinary. The idea is to mix all of those up, to give them to the

players, as they would like to build it. Same goes for the voice. We wanted to separate

this out, so the players can choose it freely. This is something we are still working on, it's

not as easy as it sounds. (Francis)

The buildup to the game was filled with messaging like this, promising and advertising an extremely trans inclusive character creator. However, when the game dropped, the reception amongst trans people was relatively negative. Reviewer Jade King said that "CD Projekt Red made a huge deal about a world where you could create a futuristic vision of yourself without compromise, inhabiting a body, voice, and personality that was unabashedly you. …The reality was far more restrictive…Pronouns were tied to voice, and no they/them option existed at all. While that would be a little disappointing (but not unexpected) for a regular character creator, it's a major let down in a game that touted itself as having a trans-friendly one,"(King). The game, which specifically advertised to have nonbinary options, does not let you have a deep voice with she/her pronouns, a higher pitched voice with he/him pronouns, or they/them pronouns at all. The "trans representation" instead comes from the character creator allowing you to pick any body feature regardless of gender, including genitalia. While this is definitely better than nothing, it shows a rather skewed view of what trans people want in terms of representation in character creators. Your character's genitalia has little to no impact on the gameplay, and in the rare moments where it does, Cyberpunk 2077 ties it to your voice choice rather than your choice in the character creator. According to King, "Sex is common in Night City, and despite having a body that we're encouraged to own, they are always expressed in a cisgendered capacity. Your romance with Judy culminates in a scene where it is heavily implied for both women involved to

be in possession of a vagina, while V's romance with Panam concludes with a similar scene that implies the presence of a penis,"(King).

It seems rather clear that the game was made with cis players specifically in mind. So, why was such a big deal made about trans options in the character creator? It seems to follow in the tradition of many cyberpunk stories of putting trans people as an object of spectacle and fetishization. Going back to the controversial poster that started the whole controversy, Cyberpunk 2077 views trans bodies as a cool accessory to a sci-fi world and not as a current, real group of people. They saw the value in marketing to trans people, but not in changing the game itself.

The example of *Cyberpunk 2077* shows a broader trend in AAA video games of marketing a trans positive or gender neutral character creator. *Saints Row,* for example, boasted its inclusive character creator in their reboot of the franchise released in 2022.(Henly) The franchise has had a long history of having a gender neutral character creator, since the second game released in 2008. However, *Saints Row* is an incredibly raunchy franchise. The games are filled with raunchy and edgy jokes, including some transphobic ones, which makes one question the motivations behind the trans positive character creator. Was the character creator meant to me another joke, at the supposed "inherent absurdity" of the trans body?

It seems to general audiences, the character creator of past games was not radical enough to be notable. In a lot of the buzz around the 2022 reboot, right wing gamers said that the new game was "woke" and a departure from the original series's raunchiness (Tassi). The gender neutral character creator in past games was not perceived as any sort of threat, but now that a very similar one is being sold as a trans positive character creator, it is seen as left wing or "woke." It is the same product, but it is being received in a drastically different way. A similar

example is the *South Park* game *South Park: The Fractured But Whole,* which had a character creator with numerous trans options that seemed to be more obviously a jab at transgender people. A reviewer who played the game as a trans woman said, "The locals weren't too thrilled with my recent revelation, either. Aside from the occasional 'little miss,' talking to anyone who wasn't offering a quest resulted in lines like this:' 'Aren't you a cute little abomination?' 'That's an interesting look you got going on, boy and/or girl. I don't see gender.'...The kicker came from my New Kid's father, who apparently knew I was trans before his call with Mr. Mackay. 'That's some new outfit, sport! Have you been going through your mom's closet again?'"(Unkle) The game treats trans people as this object of comedic spectacle, and the character creator is a reflection of this. Saints Row games comparatively do not make that many overt transphobic jokes about your character, but it makes your player and others make transphobic jokes. In Saints Row 2, you make multiple jokes about your male friend Piers having a vagina, which is especially bizarre if you made your character trans. Despite these contradictions, the franchise has long had one of the best gender neutral character creators in a AAA game.

Another trend that has been occuring in character creators is the use of "styles" instead of gender options. The games *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Splatoon 3* both had these types of character creators. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons,* you are made to choose a style between two options. One has a short flat hairstyle and the other has a ponytail. However, when you start designing your character, you have full access to all of the hairstyles, eye types, and more, regardless of this "style" choice. In addition, the style choice does not affect pronouns or the way villagers refer to you. The game is really close to being truly gender neutral, but the arbitrary style choice still exists. What is the point of the style choice if it does not affect gameplay or character creation at all?

Splatoon 3 has the same system. You have 4 choices to pick from, with two variants of the Inkling and Octoling species that are present in the game. While hairstyles are locked by whether you are an Inkling or an Octoling, they are not locked by the styles that are meant to be gender. The only difference is a light thickening of eyebrows if you pick the more "masculine" style. While the ability to access all hairstyles is nice, the question becomes why have style options like that at all and just have people choose which eyebrows they want? It seems like the gender binary has a lingering effect on these games despite being unnecessary to the actual gameplay.

So, what then is the answer for a truly gender inclusive character creator? In an Uppsala University study on transgender and genderqueer experiences with avatar creation, transgender gamers were asked questions about their experiences with character creators. When asked "What would need to change for the average character customization to better represent you," the greatest amount of responses were for a larger variety of body types, non-normative options, pronoun options, and gender unspecific clothing and cosmetics (van Aller). This seems to be a combination of a lot of the attempts that were discussed earlier. Another question asked what a game the respondent thought had good character creation could do better, and the responses were overwhelmingly more gender-unspecific customizable appearance, with pronouns a strong second.

One major obstacle in the push for more representation in character creators is Capitalism. According to Tara Jane Copplestone, "it was observed that in the videogame industry, many of these normative perceptions of the relationship between videogames, accuracy and cultural-heritage were controlled and perpetuated by higher-management tiers. For these individuals, the key concern was on minimizing risk, whilst those engaged in the core of

production (especially narrative designers and program-mers) often acknowledged this problematic approach, but lacked the means or permission to produce differently,"(Copplestone). This analysis makes the decisions large game studios make in terms of transgender representation in video games make more sense. For Nintendo, the urge to let your character look however you wanted regardless of gender was tempered by the desire not to anger people who may have gotten angry if the game didn't let you pick between a boy and a girl. For *Saints Row*, once the gender neutrality and trans representation was perceived as a threat and not a joke, it was review bombed and called "woke," (Tassi). That response is a clear message to large game studios to never go too far with trans representation. With Cyberpunk 2077, the main audience was always going to be cisgender heterosexual men, and the use of transgender people in the game was meant to be a fetish object for them to enjoy. The fetishistic poster that CD Projeckt Red claimed was some sort of commentary on capitalism was just a microcosm for the role of transness in the game as a whole. Perhaps if the transness in the game was depicted in a more genuine manner, the same group calling *Saints Row(2022)* left wing and "woke" would boycott *Cyberpunk 2077* as well.

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