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CS382 Final Project Report
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The Call for a Gender-Neutral Character Creator

My goal with this project was to create a gender neutral character creator. The first question you are always asked when you start to play a video game is “Man or Woman?”. As someone who’s transgender, that’s never an easy question. I don’t identify as either of the binary categories we usually place gender in, so while RPGs are my means to escape reality, I still generally cannot escape the gender binary. Video games, especially those in which your character is customizable at every other level, should be open to all. If I want to immerse myself in fantasy worlds with elves and magic, aliens and spaceships, or monsters and demons, I should be able to express my gender how I want to as well.

I was inspired differently by two main character creation outlets: the highly realistic AAA binary character creators, and the Indie/Web CCs that have incorporated these ideas already. I play a lot of Bioware games in my free time (and when I should be working on other things) and they are a progressive company in the grand scheme of AAA gaming. What brought me back to gaming in my young adult life was a character from Bioware’s Dragon Age, Zevran, who made male, cis, straight gamers angry by flirting with their (male, cis, straight) characters unprompted. So it was no surprise to me when I heard the newest Dragon Age game was going to have a transgender character in it. I followed any news of Kremisius Aclassi before and after the game’s release and was happy to hear about the amount of thought that went into his creation. Developer Patrick Weekes said “In [creating Krem], we saw how much of our game’s engine was based on set gender assignments, from voice to face to animation set to localization plan for foreign languages(Weekes).”

It's important to note that creating vast, essentialist differences between men and women in video games is a conscience choice. Creating different animation patterns, two sets of every armor (usually with quite different amounts of skin showing), multiple sets of voice acting and different responses from characters in regards to the player character's gender etc. is unnecessarily complicated. Many games forgo this by simply making your player character male with minimal customization. Obviously, this isn't the kind of solution I have in mind. Indie and web-based games, in their quest to consolidate resources, have found a better one. Gender neutral character creation. Some web-based games like Preloaded's "The End" don't bother asking you what gender you want your character to be and take you straight to a character customization screen that includes long and short hair, leggings, skirts, and baggy pants, and the option to have facial hair.

Some games, like indie game "Read Only Memories", are more deliberate. They specifically use terms like "non-binary" and "gender neutral", and give you the option to choose your own gender pronouns. The web based game Fallen London asks for your character's gender, and you have the option to respond, "My dear sir, there are individuals roaming the streets of Fallen London at this very moment with the faces of squid! Squid! Do you ask them their gender? And yet you waste our time asking me trifling and impertinent questions about mine? It is my own business, sir, and I bid you good day," which is my usual reaction to someone asking me my gender. I really want to create a game like this. I can only imagine a AAA style character creator that is totally gender neutral, but that wasn't *quite* in the scope of this project or my skillset. Setting up the basic components of the program took more of my time than expected. I enjoyed creating the outfits and things like that, but coding them from scratch probably wasn't the most effective way to do it. While I didn't get to implement everything I

would have liked to in this project, I have many more ideas that I am either going to use to expand this project in the future, or bring to a new opportunity.

One more thing that I find inadequate in most character creators that I wanted to address with my project is racial equity. In the most realistic AAA character creators with the most lovingly rendered elf ears, scales, and fur coats, poorly thought out dark skin is the quickest way to ruin the immersion. I spent time picking out skin tones that felt realistic and were non-white. I created an afro because with what limited shapes I was working with I wanted to do what no AAA game has done before: provide black hair styles with the same amount of attention and detail as other hair styles in the creator. The more I dig into the project, the more specifically racial options I want to make. I'd love to include hijabs, turbans, hair textures, religious garb and symbols, a wider variety of skin tones, and consciously thought out facial features in the project.

I'm quite proud of what I ended up creating. My project uses only the basic shapes in Processing and some text to set up a character creator in which you can select different attributes for Mea, a backstory-less non-binary person on a mission. You can change Mea's hair, hair color, outfit, and skin tone using arrows found to the side of them. Only two options are available for each attribute right now, and implementing more would require an overhaul of the system the code uses to know which option is selected. It currently uses boolean operators to draw either the "true" or "false" option for each attribute. This would be the major hurdle to expanding the project as it currently stands, but I feel confident any number of changes could be made to implement more options. In creating more attributes, I would want to create a menu to the side of Mea that could be selected and take the player to submenus including categories such as "Body", "Outfit", and "Face". This project could be easily expanded, but as it stands now, Mea Creator is a testament to what I learned in Visual Computing and addresses the reasons I started this project. I hope you enjoy playing around with it.

References

Weekes, Patrick. "Building a Character: Cremisius Krem" Aclassi". blog.bioware.com. 2014.