

Impossible Identities: The Limitations of Character Creation Systems

Alayna Cole

University of the Sunshine Coast
Sippy Downs Drive
Sippy Downs
acole@usc.edu.au

Dakoda Barker

University of the Sunshine Coast
Sippy Downs Drive
Sippy Downs
dbarker@usc.edu.au

Jessica Zammit

University of Wollongong
Northfields Avenue
Wollongong
jzammit@uow.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

Exposure to representations of diverse characters in media—including videogames—can positively impact identity formation, and foster empathy (Athanasas 1998: 292). Videogames present a unique opportunity for audiences to create their own characters, which are canvases for them to project their own or another's identity (Papale 2014: n.p.).

Projection is considered the 'conceptual opposite' of identification, with the player able to place their own personality, values, and choices onto a character, rather than the reverse (Papale 2014: n.p.). The extent to which this takes place can vary, from minimal changes in the form of narrative choices, to blank-slate player-characters with no pre-determined traits. Characters that are designed entirely using in-game character creation tools offer the greatest opportunity for players to 'project' upon them, facilitating identity formation by allowing audiences to participate in self-guided experimentation.

Games with blank-slate player-characters imply that they are granting their audiences freedom regarding who they wish to play; however, character creation systems inevitably feature limitations due to the conscious and unconscious restrictions that game developers have implemented. Limitations of gender, race, sexuality, and body diversity restrict some players from being able to project their own identities onto the characters they create, implying that they are not permitted to engage with the game as themselves.

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As a component of an existing inductive research project by Cole (Queerly Represent Me 2016), a qualitative survey was conducted in May 2016, which asked 158 online participants for their opinions on games featuring queer content. Two of the questions within this survey asked for participants' favourite and least favourite character creation systems. Due to the overall topic of the survey, participants were primed to respond to this question in terms of representations of sexuality and gender; however, many participants also chose to justify their responses with reference to diversity of race and body type.

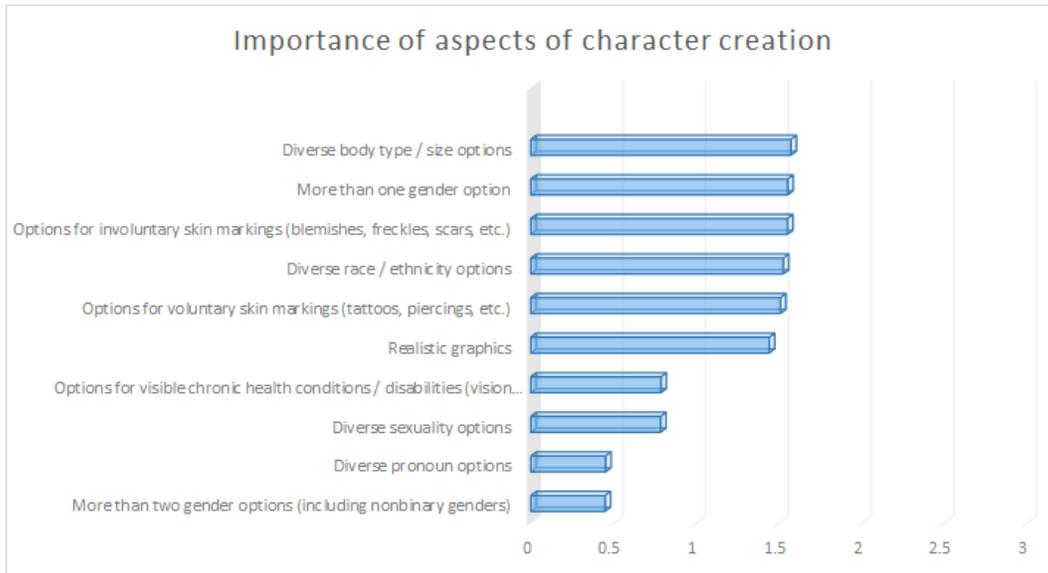
Participants criticised games that restrict a character's gender, including games that only allow gender binary options. Creators that segregate 'male' and 'female' hairstyles, clothing, and voice options were also criticised. Participants praised games like *Read Only Memories* for its diverse pronoun selection, the *Saints Row* series for unsegregated customisation options, and *LongStory* for allowing players to select an image for their character without choosing a gender. *Fallout 4* was criticised because, despite allowing players to customise both themselves and their spouse, the game forces the player to exit the character creation system with one man and one woman, one of whom is the player-character; the reliance on binary genders in this title restricts the player-character's sexuality.

Character creators that allow for varied race and ethnicity (through aspects such as skin tone and eye shape) were praised by survey participants, as were systems that allowed players to create characters with diverse body types (including variable weight, muscularity, and the option of tattoos, scars, blemishes, skin conditions, and chronic health conditions). Participants frequently indicated that a selection of these variables were of particular importance to them, typically due to a parallel with their own appearance and traits. Many survey participants prioritised the feeling of being represented in the character creation systems they used.

This preliminary information led to the creation of a more detailed qualitative survey, as part of a project entitled, 'Analysing opinions and correlations regarding representation of diverse identifiers in games'. This project was conducted with 6,010 participants, and collected data on diverse representation, including fifteen questions about character creation systems, of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. These questions covered topics such as which features made participants most like or dislike a character creation system, whether they believed particular character traits were especially important (such as skin colour, gender, body shape, skin markings, etc.), and whether they liked being able to represent themselves within a game.

Preliminary analysis has been performed on the quantitative data, providing information about the aspects of character creation systems that participants prioritise, and revealing correlations between these priorities and people's broader feelings towards representation of diversity in games. Generally, participants indicated that they care more about options for body types, binary genders, involuntary skin markings, race / ethnicity, voluntary skin markings, and realistic graphics, than about options for aspects such as visible chronic health conditions, sexualities, pronouns, or nonbinary genders (**Fig. 1**).

Figure 1. Importance of aspects of character creation in the opinion of survey participants, on a scale of 0 to 3.



Based on this foundational data, we have also conducted quantitative analysis on the ways an individual’s demographic information aligns with the aspects of character creation they are most invested in, and how their broader feelings towards the significance of representation in games alters their priorities in character creation systems. We will be presenting our conclusions, with the hope of giving game developers greater understanding of how to ensure diverse audiences are represented in the character creation systems they embed within their games.

BIO

Alayna Cole – Alayna Cole is a lecturer in Serious Games and a doctoral candidate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She has broad research interests, but she is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. Her doctoral thesis—entitled *Queerly Ever After*—comprises a collection of reimagined fairy tales that seek to incorporate plurisexual perspectives. She is also the founder of Queerly Represent Me, an online database collating more than 700 game titles that feature queer representation.

Dakoda Barker – Dakoda Barker is a lecturer in Serious Games and a doctoral candidate in Creative Arts (Serious Games) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His primary research area is representation of chronic health conditions in videogames and the techniques used to create them. He explores these topics through his doctoral thesis *The Mighty Spoon* and the accompanying creative artefact, comprised of four individual videogame texts: *threesixfive*, *Rise*, *The Denouement*, and *Defence of the Anxious*.

Jessica Zammit – Jessica Zammit is a tutor in statistics and research methods, and an MPhil (Psychology) candidate. Her primary research focus is the area of language, memory, and cognition. She is the primary data analyst for Queerly Represent Me, a database and resource hub for games featuring queer content.

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