

The Gender Expression Influencing Factors: Understanding the Gender Expression in Avatar Customization

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INTRODUCTION

Videogames provide an ideal environment for gender exploration and expression (McKenna 2022; Morgan et al. 2020; Rivera 2022; Strauss et al. 2019). However, it is also a space where players' behaviors and self-expression are constrained by the encoded options (Kosciesza 2023). As stated by Crowe and Watts (2014), "virtual gender is not a blank canvas." So, what limitations or influences do players encounter in avatar customizations?

While previous research has explored the relationship between players' gender expression strategies and factors in avatar customizations such as game encoding (Biscop et al. 2019), gender stereotypes (Drenten et al. 2019), gaming markets and societal values (Geraci and Geraci 2013), there is currently a lack of a more comprehensive qualitative investigation into the factors influencing players' gender expression. Given that there is a gap in understanding how avatars serve as tools for gender expression (Whitehouse et al. 2023), this work explores the influencing factors of players' gender expression in the avatar customization process.

Drawing from queer game studies work by Ruberg and Shaw (2017), and Judith Butler's gender performativity (1999), this study draws from semi-structured interviews I conducted with a diverse group of 20 video game players between June, 2023 and September, 2023. Among the interviewees, five of them hold positions as gaming industry practitioners, offering insights from the perspective of game development for this research. The interviewees encompass a variety of gender identities, as identified by themselves, including cisgender, transgender, gender fluid, non-binary, and gender apathetic.

I apply a grounded theory approach as a process to code the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Specifically, I recorded the interview process and transcribed it into text. I then imported the data into the data analysis software NVivo (R1) and conducted open coding and axial coding, following the methodology outlined by Strauss and Corbin.

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I conducted a preliminary decomposition of the raw data to form concepts, which were then distilled into themes. Through this bottom-up analytical process, I identified the six themes as factors that influence players' gender expression in avatar customization:

- **Player-Avatar Relationship (PAR)** draws from Banks' (2015) research, which categorizes the relationship into Avatar as *object, me, symbiote, and other*. *"It's more of making someone that is similar to myself and being like, oh, I can explore like, what if I was a little more confident? Or what if I did like this thing instead? Or it's a lot more like, what if I could play a more competent version of myself?"* (Gender apathetic, Canada)
- **Aesthetic** refers to the player's pursuit of characteristics or appearances that align with their own aesthetic preferences. *"My aesthetic expression should have some synergy with my gender expression, that is to say that my aesthetic expression should encompass the kind of social gender expression that neither strongly masculinity nor femininity."* (Biological female without gender identity, China)
- **Gaming Environment** refers to the context in which players engage with the game, encompassing the social environment, such as societal gender norms and policy influences, as well as the *co-situated play* drawn from Victoria McArthur, which is "defined as two or more players who are playing the same game together." (McArthur 2018) *"...if I was playing something, or making a character with other people around, I would absolutely not do it the way that I normally would, even if I'm conscious of it, or not, I've started becoming quite aware of that."* (Between non-binary and female, Australia)
- **Gender Framework** encompasses the coded or designed perspective of gender within the avatar customization system. *"I think that the language is a big part of it, you know, if they've written things so that the dialogue works with non-binary language, if they've thought about the fact that it's not just pronouns..."* (Non-binary, US)
- **Game Genre** includes the information of a game's theme, art style, fundamental features, and the gameplay mechanics defined by the designers. *"I guess it depends on the gameplay. If it's a heavy story game, but you still can create a character... I guess it [my avatar choices] could change."* (Gender fluid, US)
- **Customization Depth** primarily focuses on the avatar customization interface, reflecting the extent to the possibility and range of customization, as well as the complexity of details. It also encompasses the assessment of gender inclusivity and diversity within the customization framework and options. *"I mean, not a lot of games I play actually give you the option to make an explicitly trans character, which is always neat and I'm just technically intersex."* (Transgender woman, Canada)

Overall, in this study, I combine perspectives from both gender diverse players and cis gendered players and ascertain the six factors that influence gender expression within avatar customization systems. This research contributes a more nuanced understanding of gender expression, using avatar customization as a vehicle into game studies literature. I hope that these influencing factors would serve as reference points in guiding the design of more inclusive avatar customization systems in the future.

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