Tracing Gender Affordances in Avatar Customization: A Methodological Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Avatar customization systems have become one of the most notable sites where players negotiate and explore gender identity (Han & Ho 2024; McKenna et al. 2022). Recent efforts to make customization more gender-inclusive have produced new design strategies. For example, games such as *OlliOlli World* (Roll7 2022) and *Saints Row* (Volition 2022) removed explicit gender toggles and instead let players shape bodies, voices, and outfits through sliders and modular options, presenting embodiment as a continuous spectrum rather than a fixed binary (see Figure 1). These developments contribute to gender inclusivity but also challenge how scholars analytically grasp the ways gender is encoded in avatar customization. This study addresses that challenge by proposing a methodological framework for studying gender affordances in contemporary avatar customization systems.

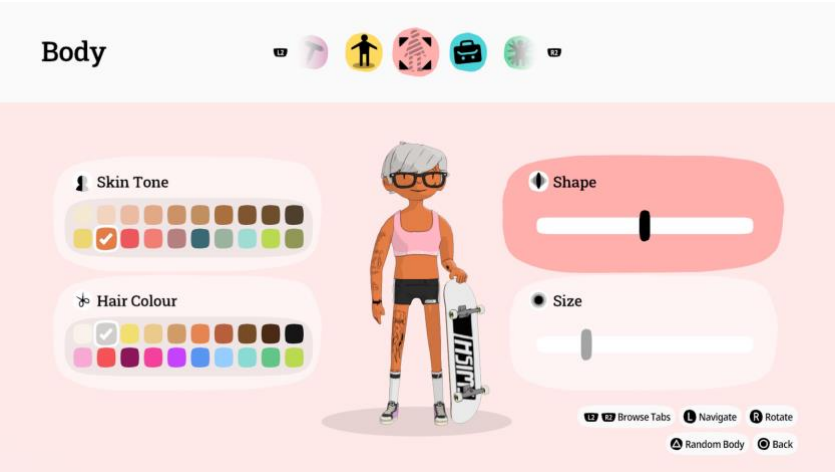

Figure 1: Avatar customization interface of *OlliOlli World.*

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Existing methods for studying avatar customization often rely on visible options (e.g., Harper 2020; McArthur & Jenson 2015). McArthur et al.'s (2015) Avatar Affordance Framework provides a valuable way to compare interfaces by examining controls along six dimensions: *Function*, *Behavior*, *Structure*, *Identifier*, *Hierarchy*, and *Default*. It systematically deconstructs customization options and recognizes innovative interface elements. However, its focus on discrete, visible widgets becomes limiting as customization grows more dynamic and diverse in system structures and forms. It remains oriented toward what appears on the screen and struggles to fully capture systems such as *OlliOlli World*, where gender is dispersed across multiple interacting choices rather than anchored to a single toggle, and where gender intersects with race, class, and other axes of identity in ways that exceed individual options. As Judith Butler (1990, 191) points out, gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity," but "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." In this sense, in the context of avatar customization, a fixed, single gender option cannot fully determine an avatar's gender identity. Thus, an analysis of gender affordances in avatar customization cannot stop at reading the "gender option" in isolation.

Iantorno and Consalvo's (2023) in-depth analysis of two computer role-playing games (CRPGs) offers an insightful model. Drawing on Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) game analysis toolkit, they show how class, race, and gender are encoded within avatar creation in CRPGs and intersect with real-world stereotypes. My framework builds on these analytic sensibilities but formalizes them into explicit lenses and pathways that can be applied comparatively across a larger and more structurally diverse sample of avatar customization systems, with a specific focus on gender affordances.

Drawing on the previous studies, I propose a methodological framework for studying gender affordances in avatar customization systems, developed through a comparative analysis of twelve contemporary games of different genres and from various platforms (see Table 1 for a full list of games). The sample leans toward more recent titles because the framework is intended to address the growing option range, flexibility, and complexity of contemporary avatar customization systems.

Game	Release Year	Developer	Developer Location
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	2020	Nintendo	Japan
Baldur's Gate 3	2023	Larian Studios	Belgium
Cyberpunk 2077	2020	CD Projekt Red	Poland
EA Sports UFC 4	2020	EA Vancouver	Canada
Elden Ring	2022	FromSoftware	Japan
Hogwarts Legacy	2023	Avalanche Software	US
Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord	2020	TaleWorlds Entertainment	Turkey
My Time at Sandrock	2023	Pathea Games	China
Nioh 2	2021	KOEI TECMO	Japan
OlliOlli World	2022	Roll7	UK
Rumbleverse	2022	Iron Galaxy Studios	US
Saints Row	2022	Volition	US

Table 1: List of games analyzed in this study.

The framework consists of four lenses:

- **Gender-Related Options:** Examines how gender is concretely represented in each system. Rather than treating gender as a single toggle, it takes all relevant options, including pronouns, body types, clothing, voice, and accessories, as components of gender expression, and asks how these gender-related options are encoded and under what conditions they present as gender expression.

- **Option Interactions and Navigational Distance:** Focuses on how gender-related options interact during customization. It traces when one choice locks, hides, or alters later options, and examines the navigational distance between interdependent options, including the time, effort, and number of steps required to move across pages and menu layers in order to modify related elements.

- **Boundaries of Gender Expression:** Identifies restrictions and boundaries that constrain gender expression and exploration, such as enforced locks between body type and clothing or voice, or possibilities on cross-category combinations. Mapping these boundaries reveals where the system enables, narrows, or excludes particular expressions and forms of experimentation.

- **Defaults and Invisible Rules:** Attends to default, hidden, and unchangeable attributes that still influence how avatars are read, including default bodies and outfits and how the system or NPCs assign pronouns. By incorporating defaults, absences, and invisible rules, this lens helps explain why some gender expressions emerge readily while others remain difficult to realize.

Methodologically, this framework can be applied by creating multiple avatars in each game and following several exploratory pathways:

- Free exploration to survey the overall customization space.

- Hierarchy examining to map interface structure and option dependencies.

- Boundary-testing to probe how far masculinized and feminized presets can be transformed into each other or, in games without explicit gender toggles, recombined through different bodies, voices, and clothing.

- Targeted attention to default, hidden, and fixed attributes that continue to shape how avatars are read.

These pathways are not meant as a rigid sequence of steps, but as a flexible set of reference routes that can be adapted to the structural particularities of each avatar customization system. Depending on the system structures and specific designs, researchers may emphasize some pathways more than others, iterate them in different orders, or return to earlier routes as new option dependencies or hidden constraints come into view. Figure 2 summarizes the methodological framework that guides my analysis of gender affordances in avatar customization systems.

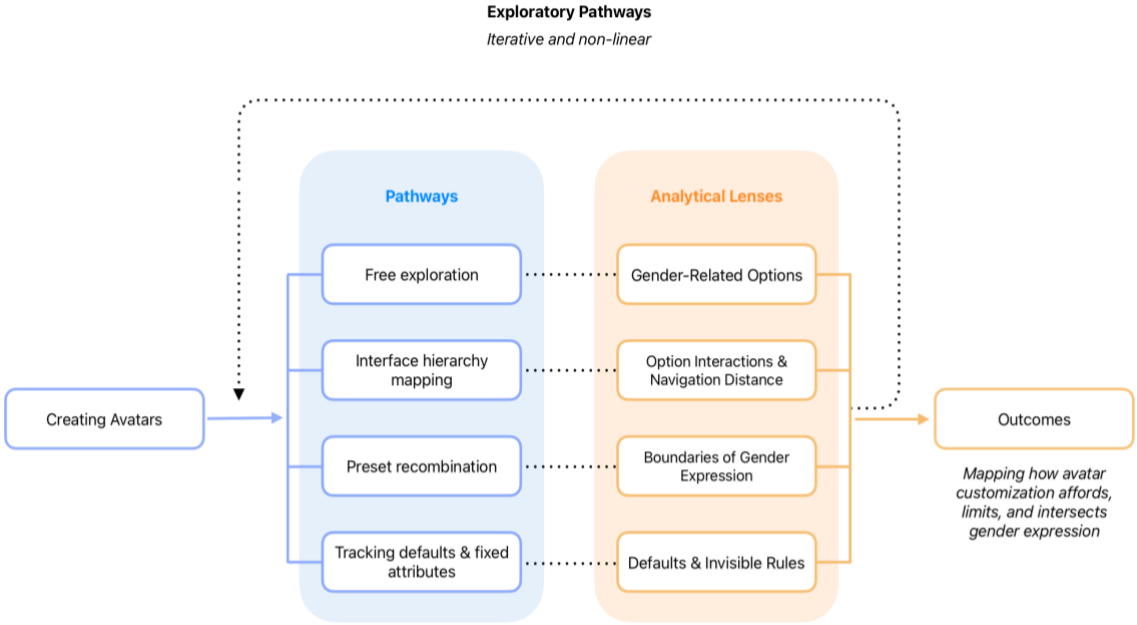

Figure 2: Methodological framework for analyzing gender affordances in avatar customization systems.

By decentering a single "gender option" and instead treating all relevant elements of the customization system as potential sites of gendering, this framework makes it possible to examine how avatar customization affords or limits gender expression. It may also help game designers reflect on how customization systems enable, constrain, or narrow players' possibilities for gender expression and exploration.

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