

# **The White Male Default**

**How do players choose who to play in games and are they able  
to choose freely?**

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## Acknowledgements

For Terry. Thanks for everything.

## Abstract

Character customization features have become integral components of many contemporary video games, allowing players to craft avatars with increasing levels of choice and detail; As the gaming industry continues to expand and technical capabilities improve, possibilities are instead limited by the choices and priorities of the development team.

This essay aims to question what influences the decisions of players when choosing or creating characters in video games, in both games with predefined protagonists or open character creation. A critical analysis of these character creators reveals underlying patterns of racial and gender biases that impact the inclusivity of virtual spaces, as well as limiting the availability for all players to present as they wish, with results finding that despite options increasing in recent years, a pervasive underrepresentation of all marginalised groups still exists.

This essay also aims to discuss determining factors in choice psychology within the gaming world, taking into consideration internal and external factors. I assert that there is a gap in existing research examining the limiting factors in choice psychology, as there is little intersection between studies examining the limited capabilities of many character creation modes and examining the choices players make within these same character creation modes. The implications of this research should be applied to active

game development, providing further insight into the types of characters that are underrepresented in the medium and which features players are actively seeking to have available. The possibility that the improvement of representation options would widen the market for games should provide an incentive for game developers to produce a more varying range of characters or more options within character creators, even before considering the social benefits that widening visible representation provides.

Key Words:

*Character creator, Avatar, Character Design, Video Games, Representation, Race, Gender*

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## Introduction

“For members of marginalized groups, representation is a necessary and a felt need.” (Kukshinov & Shaw [15]). Investigating who people choose to play in games and whether they can play as they want could be key to the improvement of social representation. Within the concepts of the playable protagonist and the avatar, studies are beginning to examine the choices of players and the choices game developers allow them. The importance of representation in games as a medium and its relation to gender and race in modern society will be discussed by analysing studies from the last three decades, though current research seems to be lacking a thorough examination of choice motivation concerning race and gender in games.

### 1. Who are we playing as?

Historically, the playable protagonists of video games have usually been men (Dill-Shackleford & Thill, 2007 [9]) and far more commonly than not, white. (Williams et al, 2009 [27]) This phenomenon has led to the overrepresentation of white men and underrepresentation of women and people of colour in games.

Beyond this, recent research has found that the proportion of self-titled ‘gamers’ in the US is nearly equal by gender (Clement, 2023 [6]), with 46% of gamers identifying as female. This statistic is not yet reflected in the characters created by game developers. A study of 209 game characters from triple-A game studios found that only 66 (32%) of the characters were female. Of that selection, 52 of the female characters were white (25% of the total), with only 14 (6% of the total) of the characters being non-white

women. Non-white men were also greatly underrepresented, with 47 (23%) of the selection being non-white males across all ethnicities (Haines, 2019 [13]). This study is limited by a fairly small pool of characters, which makes generalisation across the field impossible, but such results are similarly reported in earlier studies. A large study of 8572 characters (Williams et al, 2009 [27]) found that 85.23% of the characters were male, and 80.05% of the total characters were white. These statistics may suggest that current trends are improving in the representation of women and people of colour, but there is still considerable overrepresentation of white men in games.

It may certainly be considered that the bias towards white characters, and particularly white men could be due to the origin of a game's development and its population. A breakdown of global market shares of games sold worldwide estimated that the top two contributors to the consumption of games in 2022 were the United States at 46.4 billion dollars, and China at 44 billion dollars (Newzoo, 2022 [3]). It could then be suggested that characters with light skin tones are more marketable to these consumers based on similarity to population (US Census, 2023 [26]; Bureau of Statistics China, 2021 [20]) but a possible correlation cannot imply causation, and the possibility that better representation would encourage game consumption in locations with different ethnic groups needs investigating.

Recent games have seen some improvement in character choice, possibly in part due to increasing memory storage, but older games suffer from a lack of options. The Harvest Moon series was noted to create entirely different copies of their games based

on gender. *Harvest Moon DS* [18] (Nintendo, 2005) became notorious for its sister game, *Harvest Moon DS: Cute* [19], released nine months later. The key difference was that *HMDS* only allowed play as a male character, while the “Cute” version only allowed play as a female. These games were not intended as sequels- the storyline and gameplay are the same, with the main differences being distinct (heterosexual) romantic interests, and more clothing options for the female main character. This had been done previously with *Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town* [16] and *More Friends of Mineral Town* [17] (Nintendo, 2003), respectively. Within the same series, *Harvest Moon: Magical Melody* [21] (Nintendo, 2005) was released both on the GameCube and the Wii. The Gamecube version allowed for a choice between a male and a female character; in the Wii version, the option to play as female had been removed.

## 2. Do we want to play as ourselves?

The question of whether players can play as the characters they want is only answerable by understanding who players choose to play as. A different method of player character delivery in games is through character creation- the player is invited to create an avatar, a “representation of the self in a given physical environment.” (Castranova, 2003 [5]) In the character creator, the player is free, in theory, to generate a character that looks however they desire. There have been many studies examining the choices that players make and whether they choose to play as “the self”, as Castranova suggests.

A study (Kukshinov & Shaw, 2022 [15]) that asked participants to create a virtual avatar found that there was a strong pattern of white men “Not choosing characters that corresponded to their race and gender”. When asked about their choices, participants were invited to measure how important representing themselves was to their created character. The study was able to suggest that “white males are in a position where they do not look for, and actively ignore the possibility of self-representation in contrast to the members of the marginalized groups...some of the White male participants said that they chose a character because it was different from them, which never happened with other participants.” By contrast, many non-white participants specifically stated that they created their character to share racial traits with themselves.

Dunn & Guadagno [10] (2011) found that when asked to create an avatar, gender was a “significant predictor” in character creation. Men more commonly created characters physically broader than themselves, while women made avatars thinner than themselves, suggesting that “gendered expectations” follow players even into their virtual presentation. This study does not address the degree to which participants chose characters with the same gender as themselves but does state that women were more likely to report that they believed their characters resembled them physically. Other studies can suggest that players tend to play as their own gender. Guadagno et al. [12] (2010) within their study found that 90.2% of men sampled chose to play as male characters, while 94.3% of women sampled reported playing as a female character. This may support previous research that some men seek less often to play as self-representing characters. A previous survey of online players (Messinger, 2008 [23])

found that generally “avatars bear similarity to their real selves, but with moderate enhancements”- though it is important to note that this survey did not assess gender differences, and none of these studies examined differences in race.

### 3. Can we play as ourselves?

A necessary consideration as to how players choose their player character is the possibility of external influence. The Avatar Affordances Framework (McArthur, Teather & Jenson, 2015 [22]) examines the differences in options available to players. The framework found that the diversity options available were frequently lacking in games (examples include the six skin tone shades included in the *Mii* interface [22], which was expanded to ten on later consoles), alongside an examination of the “default” character presented to players in character creation menus. The framework found that without options for the player to initially input information about gender and race, the default base character presented to the player was nearly always a white male. In the singular exception that a black male was presented initially, the context of the game “presents the narrative of the Third Street Saints gang” [22], a trope additionally seen in other games [7].

Other games seem to lack the option to create non-white players entirely. Dietrich [8] (2013) examined every MMORPG game that appeared available to play online and found that the availability of representation even when players could create their character was lacking. “Of 65 games examined...26 of them had no options to change skin color whatsoever...[39 games] allowed for some kind of alteration of skin color.

However, of those 39, only 16 allowed you to choose colors of the darkest category...

Very few hairstyles could be naturally worn by those with “African” hair...many only had one or two available compared to many more straight hairstyles.”

A lack of representation in games with character creation has made its way to global attention. A petition signed by 86,412 petitioners [25] in 2020 requested that developer EA add additional skin-tone swatches to life-simulation game *The Sims 4*, stating “[Upon release] the game had little to no range for darker-skinned people...Representation matters! We deserve to accurately show and represent ourselves”. EA later responded[1], updating the game with “at least a hundred new skin tone swatches...with a particular emphasis on darker skin tones”.

Separate from a lack of representation is a lack of safety while playing games. Some research suggests female players may choose to gender swap to avoid online harassment. “many female players have learned that it is dangerous to reveal your real life gender in MMOs because they will be branded as incompetent and constantly propositioned” (Yee, 2008 [28]). An analysis found that “women make decisions, often before gameplay even begins, to avoid being identified as a woman” (Fox & Tang 2016 [11]).

## Conclusion

Representation within games changes with every new release. The availability of communication between consumers and developers seems to allow for positive

improvements to the availability of race and gender representation in modern games. Despite this, evidence suggests that more active decisions need to be taken by game developers to create characters beyond the default and provide more options for women and people of colour. An interesting correlation found through my research is that many white men also seem keen to explore characters beyond their own gender or racial traits, so it seems that the natural progression of game design should include the creation of more diverse characters, particularly for the least represented category, women of colour.

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