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Searching for Sliders: Gender Representation in Video Games

Nicole Pero

Sponsored by Melanie Blood

ABSTRACT

How does the protagonist of a video game and their gender affect the player's experience? Is it really possible for players outside the gender binary to reach verisimilitude with their protagonists? These are the questions Pero will be trying to answer across many contemporary games.

Frankie was a blue-haired, generally made-up, and pump-wearing hero. They were a non-binary avatar I made in the game *Saint's Row 3*, and they had a largely butch, feminine look—tight leather pants, a wifebeater, and a denim jacket. Sometimes, they sported a set of bright magenta knuckle bandages for the aesthetic, and their voice was a rich, British baritone rumble. Cocky and sometimes goofy to a fault, they were the ideal avatar for me to explore the outlandish, absurd world of the game and play around with gender presentation at the same time. *Saint's Row 3* was one of the first games I experienced as a newly-christened PC gamer, and from there on out, I played plenty more games, but none of them really allowed me to put on a queer, gendered performance as much as the *Saint's Row* series.

Video games, as a genre of media, allow the player to experience a world that isn't their own and a situation they would otherwise never experience. The best way to pull in a player is to have 1. Interesting gameplay, 2. A well-written and immersive story, if applicable, and 3. a player character who is sympathetic to the player and onto whom the player can map themselves in the game world. I'm going to be focusing my research mainly on the last point of interest—the player character. For the purposes of making sure everyone is on the same page, I'll be delving into some gaming history to show where character creation has grown and changed over time.

Beginning in the mid-50's, games were largely used for computer research and military training (Strong,

2016). However, what we think of as video games weren't around until the late 1960s with the invention of the Odyssey, the first home videogame system. Before this time, video games were hard to code and produce, and they were difficult for the general public to access. With 1972 came *Pong*, which kick-started the arcade era; in *Pong*, there is no visible player character, and the players themselves are meant to be playing next to one another while controlling the joysticks on the very 1970s-looking yellow and dark wood-grain arcade machine. Later games like *Dig Dug* and *Pac-Man* have very recognizable, if diminutive, player characters who helped create a brand and drew players to their arcade machines. However, the genders of these player characters have often been hard to discern or just assumed to be male.

For example, *Metroid's* Samus Aran was assumed to be male because during the entirety of the game, she is encased in a bulky, red-yellow-and-green power suit while shooting down foes. In order for her gender to be revealed, the player must finish the game under a certain time, after which Samus either pulls off her helmet or pops out of the mechanical suit in a pink leotard/bikini and waves at the player, depending on your finish time. Whether or not Samus is a feminist icon is hotly disputed in the world of video games, some claiming that this player reward system downplays her status as a female character and is used mostly for shock value. Rupert Goodwins (1994) of *The Independent* claims: "The hero, one Samus Aran, is apparently female, although the Transformer-like suit she wears could just as easily contain a large cen-



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taped; it's hardly a breakthrough for feminism." While I would argue that she kicks ass and takes names throughout the game before the big reveal and should therefore be considered a powerful, feminist character, some would argue that her final appearance in the original arcade game cements her as gimmicky and for-the-male-gaze. Still, others argue that her perky wave confronts the oft-male player with his sexist assumptions. I think I sit somewhere in the middle, both critical of her over-sexualized appearance as a reward for the male player and supportive of her overall badassery and sassy "I-bet-you-didn't-expect-me" confrontation of the player.



Figure 1. *Metroid* (1986), an action-adventure video game created by Nintendo.

Alongside Samus, we have male game heroes like Nintendo's Jumpman AKA Mario, Bomberman, Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Megaman, *Metal Gear*'s Solid Snake, Sonic the Hedgehog, *The Legend of Zelda*'s Link, and several others. This long list of male game heroes stems largely from the marketing of video games, which after the Video Game Crash of 1983 began marketing specifically to male children, beginning with the company Nintendo. Immediately before the video game crash, third-party game devel-



Figure 2. The evolution of Lara Croft, the protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* series.

opment was made legal in 1982, making it possible for individuals to produce cheap knock-offs of popular games and systems. These knock-offs and low-budget flops began flooding the market, causing gamers to steer clear of new games and systems. Therefore, when Nintendo moved its marketing elsewhere, they chose to market specifically to children, in the toy aisles of stores, which were completely separated by gender. Arbitrarily, Nintendo decided to market to boys instead of girls, and thus the gender divide in gaming was born (truTV, 2015). While many girls and women still played games and enjoyed them, the world of video games was much more hostile to women and girls who wanted to be included in the community. For example, one of the early North American advertisements for *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* included the phrase "Willst thou get the girl? Or play like one?" (Stevenson, 2007). Advertisements like these, which were targeted at boys and outwardly excluded girls, served to reinforce the growing "boy's club" that was video gaming culture.

Much later, and with the advent of new gaming systems and more robust engines, we were introduced to *Tomb Raider*'s infamous Lara Croft, who came to be in the late 90s and was one of the first 3D-rendered game protagonists to reach gamer fame. She and her sharp polygon-shaped boobs are the first thing you think of when someone mentions the *Tomb Raider* franchise, though in recent years with the 2013 reboot, developer Square Enix endeavored to make her more palatable to a female gaming populace. Playing the original *Tomb Raider*, it is easy to see that her outward appearance and her story are centered on the male viewer as she jumps around crypts wielding



Figure 3. *Lara Croft* as depicted in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is less sexualized but more victimized than she was in the original 1996 game.



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dual pistols, generally destroying valuable archaeological sites and murdering local wildlife. Neo-imperialist themes aside, some have argued that her most recent reboot has taken her from sexy yet independent, to playing the role of the victim. Kellie Foxx-Gonzalez (2012) from *The Mary Sue* explains the ways in which the reboot victimizes Lara Croft, often with the threat of extreme violence, rape, and death:

Rosenberg [the head developer] argues that Lara Croft has not become the badass adventurer we all know and love yet, and furthermore, being a female protagonist, gamers (men) don't relate to her normally anyway, thus, she is a heroine to be protected instead of emulated or admired.

What this says about female protagonists like Lara Croft is they are encroaching so sinisterly on the male domain of video games that the only way for majority male gamers to accept them as protagonists is for them to either be sexually objectified or subject to sexual and bodily violence.



Figure 4. *Nier: Automata* (2017) furthers the idea that the only way male video game players will accept a female protagonist is if she is overly sexualized.

A lot of women's issues with being represented by busty, skimpy-clothes-wearing action girls like Lara Croft stem from ideas about the male gaze, often discussed in the context of film analysis. Feminist scholar and film analyst Laura Mulvey (1975) describes the male gaze as a situation in which men are situated as those who look, while women are bearers of that look. Mulvey (1975) says that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 11). If we

are assuming a largely male audience for video games, we can put the male player in the position of the male protagonist in film who views the women of the film, as well as in the position of the camera itself. In many cases, the player themselves is made to control the camera angle of the game, and it can be manipulated to exploit and view places on even a female player character that are meant to be kept out of view. The women situated as early video game protagonists were largely made for the male gaze, because video game companies marketed largely to men and boys.

Women, as gamers, have been pushing the gaming industry in a more inclusive direction for decades. For example, Namco claims to originally have created *Pac-Man* with female players in mind. Creator Toru Iwatani says in an interview 30 years after *Pac-Man's* release, "Most arcade videogames of the time were violent and focused on the male player, so the game-centers became places frequented mainly by men. We decided to change that demographic by designing games that can appeal to women and thus to couples, therefore making game-centers desirable places to go on a date" (Purchase, 2017). Iwatani's focus on heterosexual couples as the default and the only kind of group to visit gaming centers serves to emphasize the heterosexism of the period. Why couldn't families be a demographic, as with later home gaming systems? This points clearly to an untapped market that existed in the 80's. And while *Pac-Man* himself exists as a yellow pizza-shaped blob, he is assumed to be gendered male. Despite assumptions, Namco found that they had a large player-base in women, and when they discovered that a couple of guys out in California were modding their arcade game so *Pac-Man* had lipstick and a fashionable mole, they decided to offer them employment. *Ms. Pac-Man* went on to be the "best-selling arcade game of all time" (*Video game history*, n.d.). Whether or not this is due to female players is unknown, but the assumption still exists.

Stepping away from issues of representation for a moment, these early console and PC game franchises often had a set protagonist because that made it easier for the game's developers to get the game out on time—having several playable characters adds double the time spent recording voice lines, rendering player models, creating textures for the aforementioned models, and inserting that player character into the existing game. Especially with the advent



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of 3D rendering (beginning with popular franchises like *Tomb Raider* and *The Legend of Zelda*), we began to see increased difficulty in creating immersive, expansive gaming worlds for exceedingly voracious players. Therefore, having a single, set player character is a way for developers to include an immersive, interesting story without involving too many player characters.



Figure 5. Official Artwork for *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013).

As for players who aren't white, cisgender male, able-bodied, straight, etc., the world of video games seems to exclude them entirely. How is a black man supposed to feel when the only representations of black men in gaming exist as gang members in the *Grand Theft Auto* series and as Michael Jordan-like sports titans? How about women who are subjected to over-sexed facsimiles like Lara Croft, Bayonetta, and Chun-Li? Trans people have to deal with absurd representations like Nintendo's Birdo and *Street Fighter's* Poison, the last of which was only included as trans in the game because U.S. audiences weren't interested in hitting/fighting "women," somehow implying that hitting/fighting a trans woman isn't fighting a "real" woman. For people who exist outside the "boy's club"



Figure 6. *Street Fighter V* (2016). Poison (left) is characterized as a transgender woman.

that is video gaming culture, how do they identify with these mostly white, cis-male characters?

One game developer's answer to this question was to randomly generate the player character. In the survival/crafting game *Rust*, the development team recently decided to implement a randomized player character system. Rather than have every player start the game as a white male, they randomly assigned each player an avatar. The avatars were half male, half female, and included a variety of races, face shapes, heights, and penis sizes for male characters. This randomized avatar was assigned to your game client ID, permanently tying that avatar to your game. For some players, this was a step in the right direction—if the game itself is procedurally generated, why shouldn't your avatar also be? Some male players didn't like the new feature, claiming that they wanted to be able to identify with their player character and couldn't do so as a female avatar. Head developer Garry Newman (2016) said that "our female players seem more pragmatic. They point out that they've already been playing *Rust* as men for the past two years. Some have got in touch to thank us. Mostly they see it as no big deal." The game has also seen significant push-back from transgender folks who dislike being made to play as a gender they haven't chosen. However, the development team stands by their decision and claims that the change isn't meant to harm trans players, but rather to allow them to focus on the gameplay for *Rust* rather than developing their own character creation engine.

It can be argued that this difference between trans players and presumably cis female players outlines a stark divide between two arguments: on one hand, you could argue that people other than cis men have been successfully identifying with mostly male game protagonists for ages, and that the player character seems not to matter to the gaming experience. On the other, it can also be argued that the player character absolutely does matter, because trans players have expressed difficulty identifying with a gendered body that they haven't chosen. It's difficult to decide whose argument is more valid, but I can see the way it works for both sides.

Trans people have used video games to explore gender and its possibilities in a safe, user-friendly space. In her article titled "Gaming is my safe space: Gen-



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der options are important for the transgender community,” Jessica Janiuk (2017) describes the way she has used games to explore gender identity as a trans woman, and one of the most helpful methods of doing that in video games is through character creation. She says:

Many of us that are trans* identified or are questioning our gender identity find solace in the virtual world. Games like *The Elder Scrolls*, *World of Warcraft*, *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, *Second Life*, and any other game that allows character creation with gender choice give us the opportunity to be seen as and interact with the world as the gender to which we identify. (Janiuk, 2017)

And for people in other marginalized communities who want to enjoy games and explore virtual worlds in the bodies and characters they feel most comfortable with, character creation seems to be the next step in representation.

Character creation in games didn't really begin with video games, but rather, it began in the *Dungeons & Dragons* community, along with other tabletop role-playing games like it. For people who aren't familiar with the endless possibilities of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game allows the player to create a character on their own, choosing from any number of fantasy races, classes, and abilities. The player is able to customize their player character down to their strength, luck, eye color, height, and weaknesses. Having recently gotten into the *D&D* world, I have a character nicknamed Grumbles: he's 4'6", he's non-verbal, has dark, freckled skin, and he's mourning his dead husband while trying to escape the reach of an angry dwarven king. None of these qualities stop Grumbles from whacking down golems with his war-axe or solving puzzles with help from his fellow travelers. In the world of *D&D*, almost any character combination is possible, and the reins for that character belong to the player alone. In the hands of a semi-competent, socially conscious Dungeon Master, any rag-tag team can come together and face down huge obstacles.

When role-playing games (RPGs) moved from the table-top to the computer screen with games like *Pool of Radiance* in 1988, where you had the ability to cus-

tomize your character's stats like strength, wisdom, and luck, they took the spirit of customization and creativity with them. Slowly, RPGs became a video game genre in their own right, and the next step for game developers was to make the player character, the actual avatar which interacts with the game environment, customizable. Some of the first games to implement customization included a series of pre-set choices: gender (male or female), race (white, black, somewhere in-between), and maybe a couple different haircuts per gender. Later RPGs from companies like BioWare and Bethesda encourage the player to choose from several character classes, histories, haircuts/colors, eye colors/shapes, facial features, etc. and alter the baseline player character. For the most part, this model is where we're at right now, and where most RPGs put their energy. However, some games include spectrums from one feature to another; for example, in some games there are sliding scales of eye size, eye tilt, and distance between eyes. These sliding scales are called "sliders," and the possibility for minute, precise changes to character avatars are immense. Some character creators nowadays are so nuanced that you can create an avatar that looks eerily similar to yourself. Essentially, this level of similarity is the goal, and its purpose is to help the player in mapping themselves onto the player character, so that they can successfully immerse themselves in the gaming environment and, ideally, buy into the franchise. Some players may also choose to create ideal or fantasy versions of themselves, essentially making a body they wish they could inhabit.

It is no coincidence that the slider takes the form of a spectrum—similar to the way feminists think of gender as more of a spectrum than a binary, where people can exist anywhere on the spectrum or even outside it, sliders in video games allow a spectrum of identities into the world of the game. While some games' sliders are limited to the physical, games like *Dark Souls* include a slider for "hormones," which allows the player character to exist on a spectrum of masculine to feminine. The slider exists as a site of opposition for gamers who have been made to choose between binary genders and identities for so long. The purpose of the slider is to increase the diversity of a game by allowing any number of choices for the player to customize their avatar, hopefully representing the diversity of gamers and their experiences.



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Some of the cooler slider mechanics I've seen have been in RPGs and titles from triple-A studios. For example, BioWare's most recent game in their *Dragon Age* franchise allows the player to add or remove an Adam's apple to the player character. The game also features an X/Y axis slider system, which allows the player to tweak physical features on another plane than the standard slider. My favorite gender-defying game, *Saint's Row 3*, includes a slider called "sex appeal," which alters either the player character's bulge size or breast size, depending on the avatar's binary gender. While this game does make the player choose either a male or female gender, the player can make an androgynous or non-binary character using the game's sliders. In the *Saint's Row* franchise, you have the choice of hairstyles from both genders, and all clothing options are available for every character. There are a few pre-recorded character voices for each gender, and you can choose from any of those when finalizing your "Saint." In *Saint's Row 4*, you can change the pitch of the pre-recorded voice, further customizing it to fit your avatar and their identity. Largely, games with character creation engines allow the queer player, the person of color, the non-white or non-cisgender player to engage with the in-game world in a much more meaningful and enriching way. It also allows the white, cis-male player to inhabit the world of the game in a body that is not his own, so that he can learn to identify with others.

Moving forward, though, how can we improve the representation of non-white, non-cisgender, and non-straight players in video games? Video game modders have begun to solve this problem. "Modding" is the process of altering a game's code to include the kinds of mechanics or gameplay the player wants to see. For example, many *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* modders have made modifications to the game which allow them to add entire maps, questlines, and enemies to the game. In the world of character creation, modders are constantly releasing new free mods which alter the character creation engine: some include more androgynous hairstyles, the ability to tweak body types more effectively, and the possibility of removing breasts on female characters. Players can then download these mods onto their games and play with fewer restrictions than the base game.

In my time, I've seen modders influence the trajectory of games and franchises, with modders creating the content that gamers want to see in their games and encouraging developers to include these changes in future games. For example, when *The Sims 4* came out, players lamented the lack of gender inclusion—the game only allowed the player to choose binary genders for their Sims. However, with a later update, *The Sims 4* included the option to change a Sim's physical frame, clothing preference, whether the Sim can get pregnant or make other Sims pregnant, and whether or not the Sim can pee standing. These changes were simple enough to add to the game, but the celebration from queer players was widespread.

Modders and indie game developers hold the future of gender representation in gaming in their hands. Because they are first and foremost players themselves, and often players who aren't represented in development studios, modders will then create the games they want to see in the market. This grassroots development will really help marginalized groups see themselves in games, because they will be the people making the games.

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