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Developing a Checklist for Non-Binary Inclusive RPG Character Creation

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ABSTRACT

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In the recent years, the visibility of non-binary individuals has been gradually increasing. This raised the discussion around non-binary representation and inclusion in media. The discussion has inevitably arrived in the game development field and brought up questions of creating playable non-binary characters, especially in the role playing games, where the player-character identification is significant. In character creation systems non-binary individuals were left the most underrepresented.

The objective of this thesis was to create an easy to follow checklist for game developers aiming to implement non-binary inclusive character creation systems. The existing video game character creation systems were examined, as well as the criticism towards them from the non-binary community. The comments and wishes of the non-binary individuals were studied in order to pinpoint the most desired features of the character creation systems. They were analyzed and collected into a development checklist.

For demonstration, an example character creation system was designed and developed by following the checklist. Possible drawbacks and issues were discussed.

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Key words: character creation, non-binary characters, representation, video games

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

AAA, Triple-A	informal classification for the games produced with a large budget, often by big companies
Canon	used to refer to the original body of work and material that is officially accepted to be a part of the work
Cisgender	a term for a person whose gender identity matches the gender assigned to them at birth
Queer	an umbrella term for gender and sexual identities other than heterosexual and cisgender, further discussed in chapter 4
LGBTQ+	acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer; + stands for other sexualities and identities that are not covered by L, G, B, T and Q initials
Non-binary	an umbrella term for genders that fall outside of gender binary of male/female
NPC	non-playable character
PC	playable character
RPG	Role Playing Game

1 INTRODUCTION

Non-binary is an umbrella term for genders that fall outside of gender binary of male/female, and in the recent years non-binary individuals have been gaining more visibility in the Western society with many countries recognising non-binary as a legal gender (for example, Canada, Australia, Austria and many others), and Merriam-Webster dictionary announcing singular "they" to be a word of the year in 2019 (Merriam-Webster 2019) as searches containing the gender-neutral pronoun have increased 313%.

Consequently, the increased awareness around gender minorities has brought up the question of media representation of non-binary people. While more non-binary characters are being introduced to TV programs and video games, their numbers are still extremely low, especially in AAA (produced by with a large budget) video games. Despite many of the popular AAA titles being role playing games, where the main character is often created by the player, none of them have the option to create a non-binary character. Studies have shown that the inability to find an accurate gender representation negatively impacts the game experience (Türkay, Kinzer 2016). Recently there has been an attempt of developing a more inclusive character creation system for Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red 2020). It, however, has been met with harsh criticism from gender minority groups for the lack of understanding of their experiences.

Both the attempts of AAA companies at inclusion and the criticism they receive signifies the need for a different approach to developing inclusive character creation systems. The aim of this thesis is to make a checklist for a non-binary inclusive character creation system, and to create an example of a non-binary inclusive character creator by following the checklist.

2 NON-BINARY CHARACTERS IN WESTERN MEDIA

2.1 Overview

In this thesis the focus is on non-binary characters portrayal in Western media, because major media companies, such as Netflix, Amazon, Hulu stream and produce a significant portion of media that people consume all over the world, thus, playing an important role in creating platforms for LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and identities other than cisgender and heterosexual) representation. For example, currently Netflix has a subscriber base of over 200 million people (Statista 2021), more than 50% of which come from outside of the United States, as seen in Figure 1.
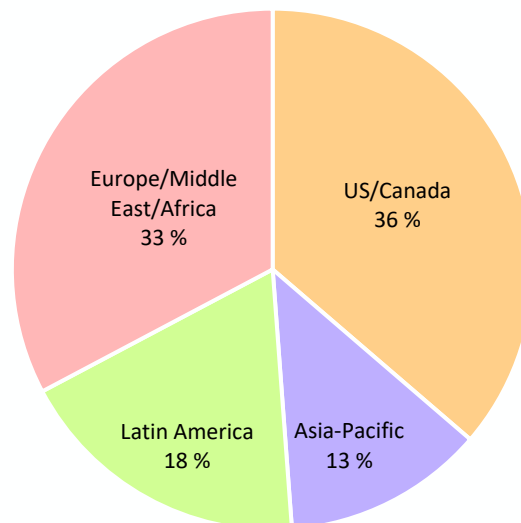

FIGURE 1. Netflix regional subscribers (Iqbal 2021)

Many of the AAA games are published by US-based game companies, such as Electronic Arts, Bethesda Softworks, 2K and several others, and while many of the development teams are international, the content of the games is moderated by the investors and publishers.

2.2   TV

GLAAD, an LBGTQ+ organization focused on media representation, publishes annual reports titled Where We Are on TV, that collect data from the American live action TV shows. According to a report of years 2020-2021, regular and recurring non-binary characters account only for 1% (or four characters) of all the characters. That is, of course, not universal statistics, but indicates a frequency trend in the portrayal of non-binary characters.

One of the notable live-action TV characters outside of binary is Janet (Picture 1) from an NBC comedy series *The Good Place* (2016 – 2020), who is, essentially, a computer program in a feminine-presenting human form. Her catchphrase, "Not a girl", is a running joke in the series and Janet repeats it every time she is misgendered.

PICTURE 1. Janet, a feminine-presenting computer program (Fremulon 2016)

Good Omens (Narrativia 2019), a mini-TV series based on a titular novel by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman and follows a demon Crowley and an angel Aziraphale, features several non-binary characters, as Neil Gaiman considers all the demons and angels non-binary (Gaiman 2019). However, there are two outstanding characters: Pollution, who uses they/them pronouns and is specifically described as non-binary, and Crowley, who is shown to change his gender expression throughout time.

Adira Tal, the first non-binary character in a long running Star Trek franchise, who debuted in *Star Trek: Discovery* (Secret Hideout 2017 – present), not only canonically belong to the gender minority, but also come out on screen. They initially were using she/her pronouns but later in the show ask to be referred to as they/them. They are also, notably, a human. With so many alien species present in the show, the writers could easily opt for making an alien to represent a gender minority, therefore risking dehumanisation of non-binary people, that is so often seen in mass media.

The situation with animated TV shows is slightly better. Often employing more radical narratives, children's films focus on group effort rather than individual stories, sometimes coming with queer and socialist subtext – "Work together, Revel in difference, Fight exploitation, Decode ideology, Invest in resistance" (Halberstam 2011). Halberstam does not talk as much about representation, as about the innate queerness of the animated narratives, but I believe it also reflects on the characters present in children's media and creates a platform for queer characters.

Steven Universe (2013 – 2019), a Cartoon Network animated series, and its sequel, *Steven Universe: Future* (2020 – present), have an outstanding number of non-binary characters, including three main characters (Picture 2). The show revolves around the adventures of a boy Steven and his friends, the Crystal Gems, a species of humanoid aliens. The Crystal Gems, along with the other members of the gem species, are all non-binary women, as Rebecca Sugar, the creator of the show, stated in an interview with NPR's 1A (Pulliam-Moore 2018). *Steven Universe: Future* also features a human non-binary character, Shep.

PICTURE 2. *Steven Universe: Future* (Cartoon Network 2020)

Among other animated non-binary characters, there is Angel, an agender kid from Cartoon Network's *Craig of the Creek* (2018 – present) series. They are an episodic character and are referred to by they/them pronouns. Also, notably one of the few human non-binary characters in animated television series. They are voiced by the storyboard artist and writer of the show, Angel Lorenzana, who is also agender.

Adventure Time (2010 – present), another Cartoon Network animated series, features a robot-computer BMO, who uses both he/him and she/her pronouns, which indicates a fluidity of their gender. What is interesting, BMO is one of the main characters of the show, and their gender expression changes from episode to episode. They also have an alter-ego called Football, who uses she/her pronouns exclusively.

Then, there is an alien shapeshifter Double Trouble from *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (DreamWorks Animation 2018 – 2020). They also use they/them pronouns and were voiced by a non-binary actor Jacob Tobia.

Some of the characters, as, for example, a Sunfire Elf Kazi (Wonderstorm 2018 – present) and Asher (DreamWorks Animation 2020 – present) are confirmed to be non-binary by the writers only off-screen, whereas in the show their gender identities are not addressed.

There is no exhaustive statistics on the non-binary characters in Western media, and it is hard to tell the exact number or percentage. Different sources suggest different numbers, for example, there are 63 non-binary characters according to LezWatch, "The Greatest Database of Queer Female, Non-Binary, & Transgender TV" (LezWatch.TV n.d.). GLAAD, on the other hand, suggests a much lower number – only four characters (GLAAD 2020). Of course, both sources use different methods and even different media to count the non-binary characters. Nevertheless, the number of non-binary characters remains quite low.

2.3   Games

In videogames, most of the non-binary representation falls to the creations of the indie developers and small game studios. Again, there is no extensive statistics on non-binary representation in games, but there is Represent Me database, which does offer some insight on gender minorities portrayal trends. As shown in Figure 2, only 5% (that is total of 12 games out of 247) of games listed to have any non-binary or gender non-conforming characters were developed by major game companies. Even among these 5%, only several games featured true non-binary characters – the ones who were stated to be such by the developers. Others are, most often, gender ambiguous (meaning the gender of the character was purposefully avoided or never discussed).
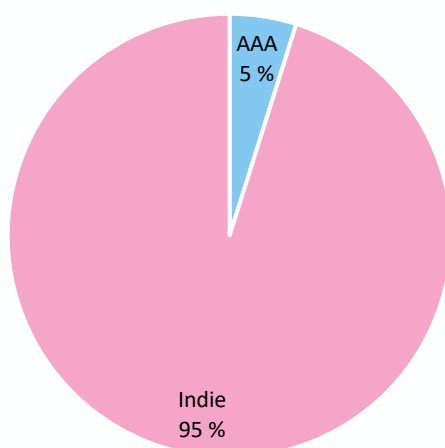

FIGURE 2. Games featuring non-binary characters according to Represent Me database sorted by developer type

Since the focus of the thesis is on AAA RPGs (Role Playing Games), a closer examination of non-binary characters in AAA games will be given.

One of the most recent, and, perhaps, most open portrayals is robot FL4K from Borderlands 3 (Gearbox Software 2019). They are referred to by they/them pronouns and wear non-binary pride flag pin. Notably, they are also a playable character. In the same game there is also a non-playable non-binary character Lorelei, who goes by she/her pronouns and is considering transitioning.

Many games by BioWare, another AAA developer, have been praised for the LGBTQ+ representation. Their most popular franchises, Mass Effect and Dragon Age, feature queer romantic relationships, as well as a transgender character Krem in the latest instalment of Dragon Age games (BioWare 2014) and a whole species of mono-gender aliens called Asari in Mass Effect series. Asari, while maybe being a representation of non-binary people, are rather sexualised female-presenting mono-gender species, often criticised for being an excuse to create a race of "hot lesbians" (Tsunderin 2015). Asari are a product of the male gaze, rather than a genuine attempt of agender representation.

In the last game of the Mass Effect series, however, there is a very easy to miss conversation between an Asari NPC (Non-Playable Character) and another alien NPC. There the Asari states that their species are not, in fact, mono-gender. The NPC also talks about how some Asari prefer feminine pronouns, others – masculine, or gender-neutral (Polo 2017). So, even though initially Asari were included in the representation table (Table 1), I removed them, because every Asari character in the Mass Effect games is female and uses she/her pronouns.

However, another and more recent game by BioWare, Apex Legends (2019), does feature a canonically non-binary playable character, Bloodhound. It is unclear whether they are a human or not.

Vivec is a confirmed non-binary deity that for the first time appeared in The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (Bethesda Game Studios 2002). He is a prominent character in the game, playing an important role in the main quest. His most recent appearance is in the expansion for The Elder Scrolls Online (ZeniMax Online Studios 2017), where he is also heavily involved in the main quest. He is mentioned in every game of the series as well. Additionally, in The Elder Scrolls series some of the gods, known as Daedric Princes, have no fixed gender. Although most of them are not physically present in the games, the player can communicate with them through the statues depicting them and do their quests. Their depiction varies from game to game, with some of Princes presenting masculine, or feminine, or both, depending on the instalment.

TABLE 1. Non-binary characters in AAA games

Character	Portrait	PC	Human	Canon non-binary
FL4K (Borderlands 3, 2019)		✓		✓
Lorelei (Borderlands 3, 2019)			✓	✓
Bloodhound (Apex Legends, 2019)		✓	?	✓
Vivec (The Elder Scrolls Online: Morrowind, 2017)				✓

3 NOT A MONSTER

There are two trends that can be clearly seen from the given overview of non-binary characters representation in mass media. First, evidently, being the lack of representation.

Underrepresentation of non-binary people in media, as any other minority group, leads to symbolic annihilation.

Symbolic annihilation is a lack of representation, as well as marginalising and trivialising of a particular group in media (Merskin 1998). With the lack of representation inevitably comes a message about societal value of these groups and individuals belonging to them. Invisibility of minorities is harmful, as the mass media representation impacts the consumers' views, beliefs, and behaviour towards the minorities (Shrum, Wyler, O'Guinn 1998).

While the consumers have no platform to learn about marginalised groups, there is a danger of applying harmful stereotypes to or ignoring the existence of the minorities (Tuchman 1978). There are damaging consequences within the minority groups as well, as the media erasure negatively impacts the perception of their societal value and self worth, and, on the contrary, positive representation helps LGBTQ+ folk with self-realization and identity (Cook 2018).

The second trend is the tendency of the creators and writers to assign non-binary genders to non-human characters. Be that monsters, robots or alien species, the prevalence of humanoid (and sometimes not even that) over human is easy to spot. Whether it is well intended or not can be debatable, the result is there regardless. Decisions to make so many of the non-binary characters also non-human support harmful beliefs and attitudes towards non-binary individuals and label them as alien, unknown, other.

This dehumanisation of non-binary folk, together with the lack of representation, can create a larger narrative both within and outside of mass media, that non-binary people are an unknown entity that exists somewhere in the outer space, or the parallel universe, rather than being humans.

Representation of the marginalised groups is important. It demystifies them and allows them to break away from systemic erasure.

4   QUEERING THE GAME

4.1   The word Queer

Queer is an umbrella term for people of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. While during 19th and most of 20th centuries the word "queer", among its other meanings, was used as a slur (Chauncey 1994), it started to be re-claimed and used as a positive self-identifier among LGBTQ+ people. However, "queer" is still considered to be a slur by some individuals in LGBTQ+ community. In academia "queer" signifies studies from non-heteronormative and non-cisnor-mative perspectives. "Queer" is oftentimes associated with political radicalism and opposing gender binary and normativity (Gamson 1995).

4.2   Queergaming

Before going into the topic of the character creator, I would like to explore the subject of queergaming, because when talking about inclusion of LGBTQ+ groups in games it is important to know the background of queer game experi-ences.

AAA game companies, as major players in the game industry, have set certain rules and expectations towards the content of games, punishing anything going beyond these set rules (Granell Vendrell 2019). This hostile attitude spreads to the discussion around social issues, including diversity. Mentions of game indus-try imperfections, such as harassment of women (Wu 2014), have prompted a campaign called GamerGate, which, in its core was a wave of violent threats against a number of female game developers, writers, and critics (Grant 2014).

Reactionary culture of the game industry has caused the stagnation of game de-sign and game narratives, keeping most developers from creating more diverse and inclusive games. The fact that most of the development teams consist of white, cisgender (people whose gender identity matches the gender assigned to them at birth), heterosexual men has also played its role in the upholding of het-eronormativity and cisgenderism.

The status quo, to nobody's surprise, is that games have seldom been made by or for queers, or even with queers in mind; they're mostly created by young and middle-aged white and Asian men, to be sold to a similar if slightly younger and slightly browner audience of consumers. Just as in analogous battles in other forms of culture and areas of public discourse, the struggle for inclusion and representation of queers has joined calls for more (and less stereotyped) representation of women and people of color (Clark 2017).

"Queergaming", as described by Edmond Y. Chang (2017), "is a challenge to this stereotypical, status quo intersection of game players, developers, cultures, and technologies". Queer game developers and consumers advocate for "queerer" game design and narratives that offer perspectives on different aspects of queer identity and experience rather than token representation, examples of which can be seen in many AAA games. Like Asari, that were created mono-gender to serve the male gaze, or Krem, who being transgender is generally irrelevant to the game narrative, or Dorian (BioWare 2014), who is a stereotypically flamboyant "fully" (romance-able only by a male player character) gay character. While being steps in the right direction, this inclusion is akin to adding another checkbox to a list and is not fully integrated in the narrative and mechanics. Yet, despite being just "another plotline", many of them are well-written characters, and their existence is a big victory in a fight for diversity within conservative and often hostile game industry.

The same goes for adding non-binary gender options for player characters. Even if it is just a checkbox in the character creation screen, it still creates another platform for non-binary representation. And, as stated before, representation matters. Ideally, of course, the player character's queerness would translate into gameplay as well, which resonates with Chang's queergaming values. This means that character's gender and/or sexuality would not be just a checkbox, a menu-driven identity but an actional form intertwined with more radical gameplay that is noncompetitive, nonproductive and embraces the potential of failure.

5   CHARACTERS AND THEIR PLAYERS

The need for diversity and inclusivity in games is clear, and the lack of non-binary characters in media, and videogames especially, is also evident.

But why is the focus on the player character? The reason lies in player identification with the avatar/player character. It influences the enjoyment of the game, as well as the player's commitment to it (Klimmit, Hefner, Vorderer 2009), so it is an important aspect to take into consideration when developing games. Avatar-based customisation of the player character further impacts player's identification with the avatar.

> ...It is not the extensiveness of the character description or how well embedded that character is in the game´s fiction, that impact on how well players identify with them. Rather it is other factors - gender and gaming experience being two of them - that are most important in determining identification (Türkay, Kinzer 2016).

As gender of the character is one of the conditions that influence player's identification, as stated in the quote from S. Türkay and C. Kinzer paper, it makes sense that inability to find accurate gender representation negatively impacts player's identification, and, therefore, game experience. Krobová et al. arrived at a similar conclusion, stating that the gender of the avatar matters more to the player than avatar's sexual orientation, and having an avatar of the desired gender allows a stronger identification.

The evident lack of representation has led to some interesting research and subsequent discoveries of how non-binary players interact with character creating systems that offer only binary options. The players often try to create characters that break gender roles, and attempt to get away from gender binary by making avatars "who obviously transgressed the arbitrary gender boundaries", meaning it is impossible to identify gender of the character (Baldwin 2018).

6   CASE STUDIES

6.1   Benchmarking

For the purpose of benchmarking for the non-binary inclusive character creation system, I am going to look at games that were noted for their character creation systems and representation of gender and pronouns by the members of LGBTQ+ community in Queerly Represent Me study (Queerly Represent Me 2019). In addition, I will examine Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Project Red 2020) as the most recent example of AAA RPG character creation system. The following case studies are separated into RPG and non-RPG categories.

According to the Queerly Represent Me study, games that allowed creation of a character that the respondents could identify with and had fewer restrictions regarding gender (examples of such restriction would be allowing facial hair only for "male" characters, having different hairstyles for "male" and "female" characters) were favored over games that did not have the same functionality. Games that ask players to assign pronouns to the character rather than selecting gender were highly praised by the respondents.

6.2   RPGs

6.2.1   Fallout 4

The character creator of Fallout 4, a post-apocalyptic RPG developed by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2014, was a second favorite character creation system of the Queerly Represent Me respondents with 15% of votes.

The variety of options available for customizing character appearance is what impressed the survey respondents. Multiple body types, a large array of skin blemishes and scars, several make-up options are the features the respondents liked.

PICTURE 3. Fallout 4 character creation screen (Bethesda Game Studios 2014)

However, despite the vast pool of options for character appearance, the game has a very strict gender binary imposed on the player, as well as a heteronormative relationship forced by the narrative. The player can only choose between one of two "sexes", as seen in Picture 3, and some appearance features, such as hairstyles (Picture 4), facial hair and make-up, are restricted to that choice.


PICTURE 4. Fallout 4 hairstyles restricted by gender of the character (Bethesda Game Studios 2014)

Rigid gender binary in character creation has received criticism.
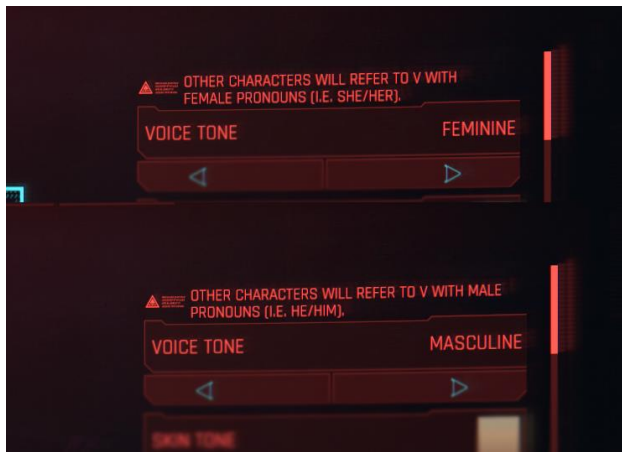
6.2.2 Cyberpunk 2077

Cyberpunk 2077, an RPG developed by CD Projekt Red and released in 2020, was not in the Queerly Represent Me survey. However, I will examine its character creation, because, at the time of writing the thesis, it is one of the most recent AAA RPG games and it might offer some insight on the industry trends regarding character creation systems.

The character creation system of Cyberpunk 2077 was one of its heavily showcased features (Henley 2020). It offers a wide range of customization options, from nail length and teeth colour to character's genitalia (Picture 5).
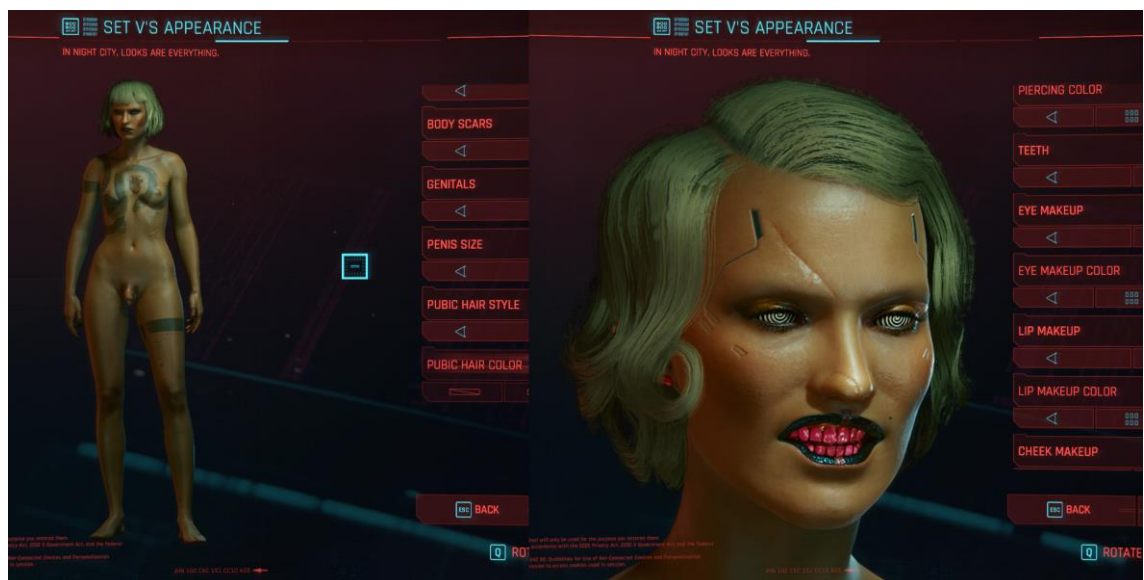
PICTURE 5. Cyberpunk 2077 character customization screen. On the left: A typically feminine body with a penis. On the right: customized teeth colour of the character (CD Projekt Red)

The character creator allows the players to choose any combination of body type and genitals (Picture 5), which can be seen as representation of the transgender community. I would argue that this choice exists in the character creator to add novelty, or even shock value, rather than genuinely represent transgender people. The evidence of that are the gender and pronouns of the character being tied to their voice (Picture 6). This promotes the idea that gender of a character (or a person, for that matter) can be identified by external traits, such as the pitch of their voice.

PICTURE 6. Cyberpunk 2077 character creation screen with voice tone options (CD Projekt Red)

For many trans people voice is an important part of gender affirmation (TransHub 2020), and the fact that the developers of Cyberpunk 2077 have focused on genitalia in attempts to be trans-inclusive and given little consideration to characters' voice, shows lack of understanding of trans experiences.

Besides, Cyberpunk 2077 has been criticised for transphobic imagery with in-game poster "Mix It Up" (Picture 7), that is "conjuring up very transphobic images and ideas that indelibly link trans people to the contents of their underwear", as Stacey Henley wrote in her article It Sucks That Cyberpunk 2077's Edgelord Marketing Worked So Well (Henley 2020).

PICTURE 7. Cyberpunk 2077 "Mix It Up" poster (CD Projekt Red)

Moreover, CD Projekt Red and the parent company, CD Projekt, posted several transphobic jokes on Twitter (DoubleJump 2020), one can be seen in Picture 8. This context leads to questions about the intentions of CD Projekt Red and points to superficial understanding (or lack of thereof) of transgender experience. Also, important to note, while the character creation system was marketed as extensively customizable and inclusive, there are no options for creating non-binary characters.


PICTURE 8. Screenshot of a transphobic joke from Cyberpunk 2077 Twitter account (Antonelli 2018)

With all criticism regarding inclusivity of Cyberpunk 2077 character creator, there are several aspects of it that are rather positive. For example, the extent of eye colour customisation, make-up, and hairstyles (note: hairstyles are restricted to the body type of the character, which is an interesting design choice for a game that lets the player attach any kind of genitalia to any body type).

6.3   Non-RPGs

6.3.1   The Sims 4

The Sims 4 is a simulation game that was developed by Redwood Shores and published by Electronic Arts in 2014. It is the game that 17% of respondents of Queerly Represent Me survey called their favorite regarding its approach to character creation, making it the most liked character creation system among the respondents.
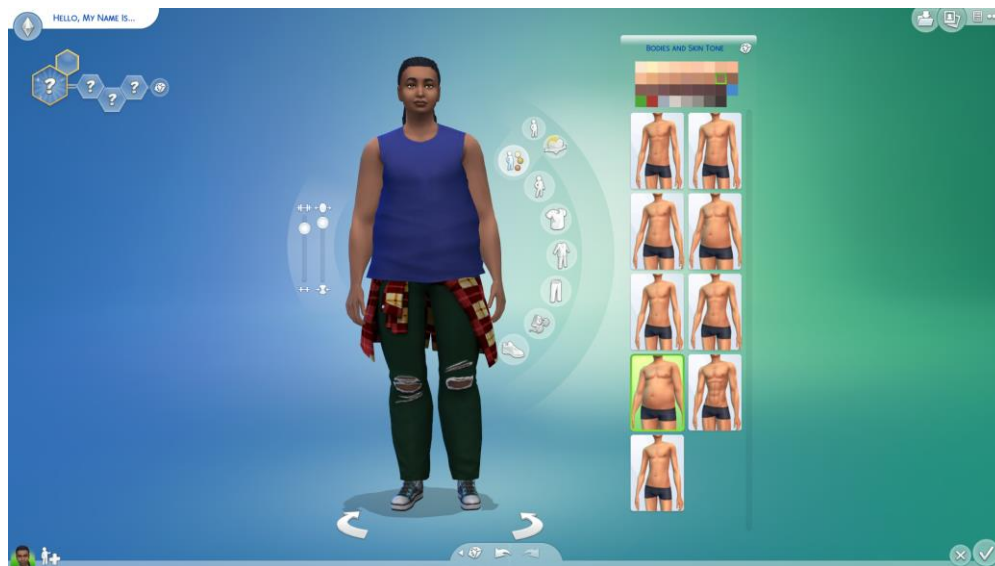
PICTURE 9. Character creation screen in The Sims 4 (Redwood Shores 2014)

The reasons behind high praise for The Sims 4 character creation system are wide range of body types, highly customizable character appearance and diversity. The Sims 4 has no gender restrictions on any item, be that a piece of clothing, hairstyle, make-up, or facial hair. Despite asking the player to choose between binary genders, the game allows to modify secondary sex characteristics, and the players are able to change Sim biology (Picture 10), that is reflected in the gameplay.

There is no non-binary option for gender of the Sim, but it is easy to create trans and gender non-conforming characters.
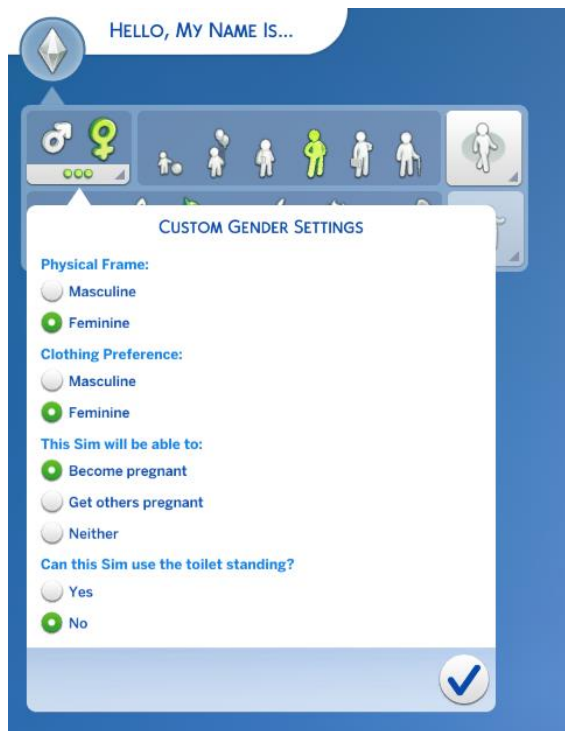
PICTURE 10. Custom gender settings in The Sims 4 (Redwood Shores 2014)

The voice of the characters is also customizable and is not tied to any of the Sim's attributes. The voice is not gendered and has tone and frequency markers instead (Picture 11).
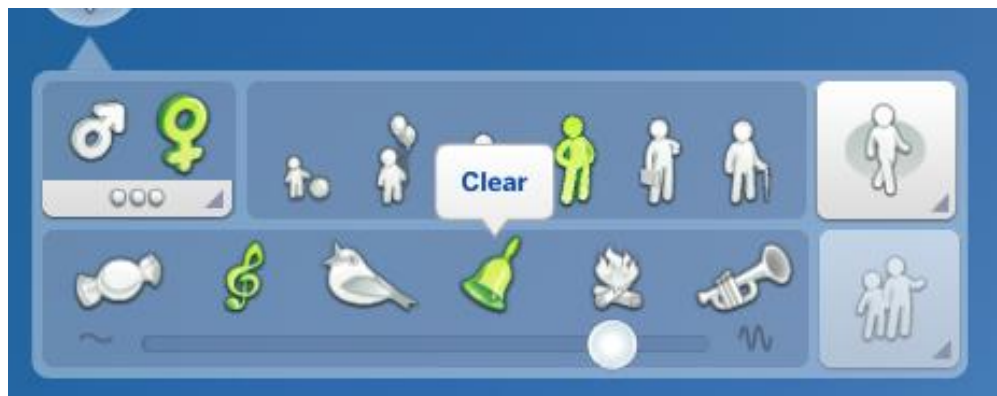

PICTURE 11. Voice customization in The Sims 4 (Redwood Shores 2014)

The Sims 4 character creation is by far the most customizable and inclusive.
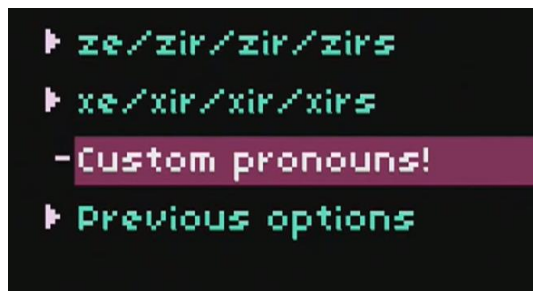
6.3.2   2064: Read Only Memories

2064: Read Only Memories is cyberpunk point-and-click adventure game developed by MidBoss and released in 2015. The game does not have an intricate character creation system but allows the player to choose pronouns for their character (Picture 12).
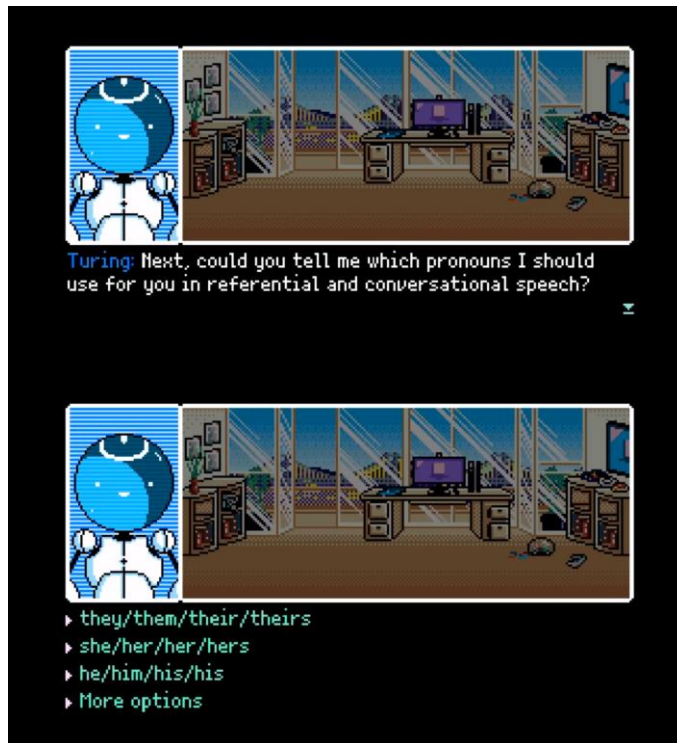
PICTURE 12. Selection of pronouns in 2064: Read Only Memories (MidBoss 2015)

The game also features less frequently used pronouns, such as ze/zir and allows the players to input their own pronouns (Picture 13).

PICTURE 13. Selection of pronouns in 2064: Read Only Memories (MidBoss 2015)

The way the game handles pronouns and gender has been praised by the respondents, although not without criticism. One of the survey respondents noted that pronoun selection beyond binary he/she is "preaching to the choir", as people who would choose non-binary pronouns are already aware of the importance of such inclusivity. Nevertheless, representation of and exposure to non-binary genders and associated pronouns is important, as discussed in Chapter 3.

6.4   Conclusions

The Sims 4 character creation system had the least restrictions tied to gender of the character, which was found to be an important feature for the queer players. However, it still included a binary gender selection, whereas 2064: Read Only Memories was able to break away from binary gender selection completely by letting the player choose the pronouns for the character. Highly customizable appearance of the characters that includes body type, skin blemishes, tattoos, make-up, and vast selection of hairstyles was also important to the respondents.

Attempts of AAA companies to make character creation systems more inclusive have been met with harsh criticism for not taking into consideration actual experiences of trans and non-binary people and exploitative manner of the inclusion.

These findings will help to make a checklist for developing non-binary inclusive character creation systems for RPGs.

7   THE CHECKLIST AND HOW IT WORKS

7.1   The Checklist

Slow inclusion of non-binary characters into game narratives can be seen, despite the general lack of non-binary representation. The developers more often attempt to make trans- and non-binary inclusive character creation systems, but cases like Cyberpunk 2077 show the need for a tool to help navigate the difficult topics of inclusivity and representation. To assist the developers in making non-binary inclusive character creation systems, I created The Checklist (Table 2).

There are three questions in the checklist: Have I asked for character's pronouns instead of gender? Have I allowed full character customization without restricting any options to certain genders? and Have I done research and asked for feedback from the non-binary players? All the questions are the result of thesis research that is summarized below.

TABLE 2. The Checklist

Have I asked for character's pronouns instead of gender?	
Have I allowed full character customization without restricting any options to certain genders?	
Have I done research and asked for feedback from the non-binary players?	

As the benchmarking and Queerly Represent Me survey showed, people favored choice of pronouns above choice of gender and a large variety of customization options that are not tied to gender or body type of the character. A similar conclusion has been achieved after a series of interviews with trans and non-binary

players conducted by Kai Baldwin for their article Virtual Avatars: Trans Experiences of Ideal Selves Through Gaming. Non-binary players wished to have a character creation system that would allow to add any physical characteristics to the body of the initially genderless character (Baldwin 2018).

It is also important to take into account opinions and experiences of non-binary individuals to create a truly inclusive system. This can be achieved by, for example, hiring an expert in LGBTQ+ representation, conducting surveys, and doing research on the matter.

To showcase how the checklist helps with the development process of non-binary inclusive character creation systems, I developed a character creator by following the checklist step by step.

7.2   The Character Creator: first steps

Before designing the character creator, itself, I developed a concept for a science-fiction RPG setting visually inspired by art deco, Prey (Arkane Studios 2017), Bioshock Infinite (Irrational Games 2013) and Metropolis (Lang 1927) and borrowing dystopian themes from We, novel written by a Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1921. Creating a conceptual RPG and selecting a particular style direction for it helped to design both user interface and character assets for the character creation system. Art deco style served as a guideline for all the design work.
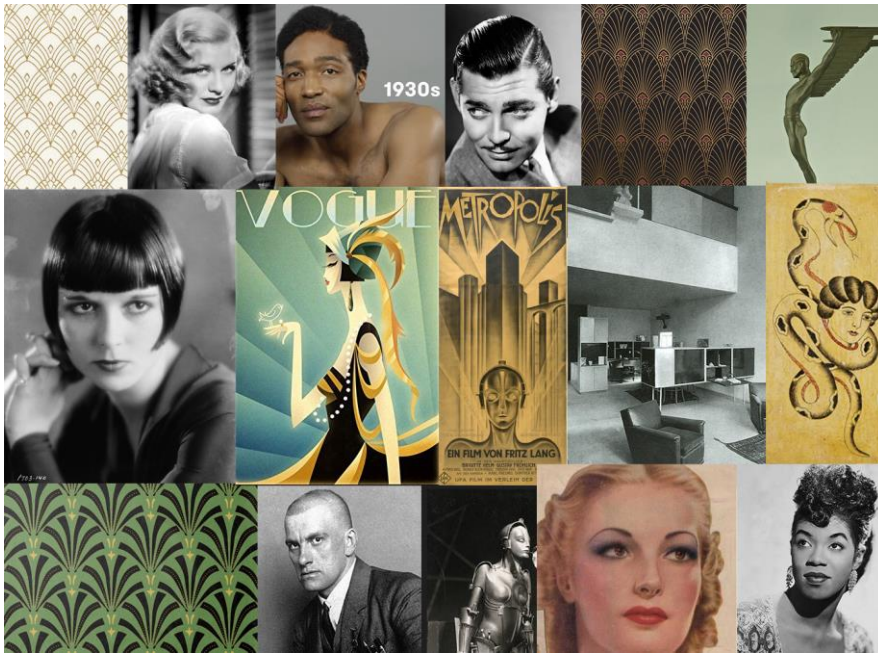
PICTURE 14. Imaginary RPG moodboard (Pinterest 2021)

The layout and general appearance of the character creation screen was made after studying other character creators, including those in Case Studies chapter. There are several basic elements that are persistent throughout most of the character creators: the character themselves, a menu for modifying the appearance, and a menu for modifying character details, such as name, class, species, background, etc.

Since the RPG exists only on a conceptual level, I omitted options for class, background, and species. This decision led to creating a simple layout that can be seen in Picture 15. To make the character creation more connected to the potential game, I decided to set it in a room environment, as if the character is looking in the mirror, similar to the character creation of Fallout 4 (Bethesda Game Studios 2014), as can be seen in Picture 3.

PICTURE 15. First rudimentary sketch of the character creation screen

It is important that the inclusivity is integrated from the beginning of the design process, so that is an equal part of production and not "extra work", which is a commonly used excuse for refraining from diverse sets of characters and representation of minority groups (Lucas 2018). So, already at this stage I had to examine the checklist and plan accordingly.

Development of the character creation system by following steps of the checklist is described further in detail. I chose Unreal Engine 4 as the development tool; all 3D modelling was done in Blender and textures were hand painted in Substance Painter and Photoshop.

7.3   Emphasis on pronouns

Using pronouns instead of gender markers makes it possible to break away from the gender binary that options like "male" or "female" force onto players and characters. This feature of the character creator is crucial to make it non-binary inclusive.

Including frequently used non-binary pronouns, instead of just they/them, can help represent a larger part of the LGBTQ+ community. Popularity of various pronouns among non-binary people can be seen in Figure 3 (Gender Census 2020).
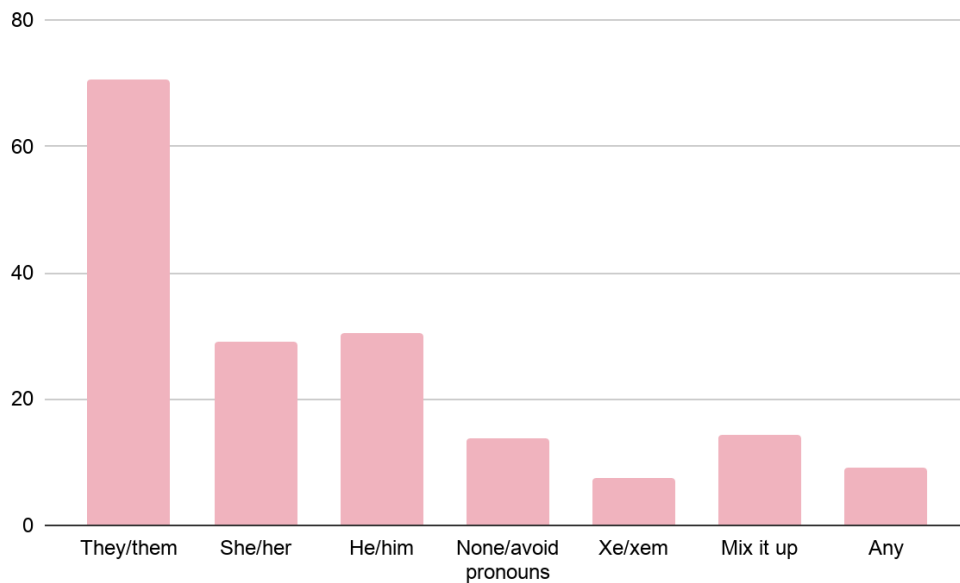
FIGURE 3. Most commonly used pronouns by non-binary individuals in 2020

Figure 3 also shows that some non-binary folk prefer to use several pronouns or no pronouns at all. This should be reflected in the character creation system as well. Additionally, there should be an option to input custom pronouns, because the most commonly used pronouns list is not exhaustive and does not represent people who use different and lesser known pronouns.

To implement the selection and input of pronouns to the character creator, I used a list of checkboxes. The checkboxes make it easy for the player to select any number of pronouns. There is also a button for adding custom pronouns. It opens a pop-up window that asks the player to input pronouns according to the template. Unfortunately, at this stage the function was rather cosmetic, as I lack expertise in programming and data management. Together with pronoun input I created a space for character's name input.
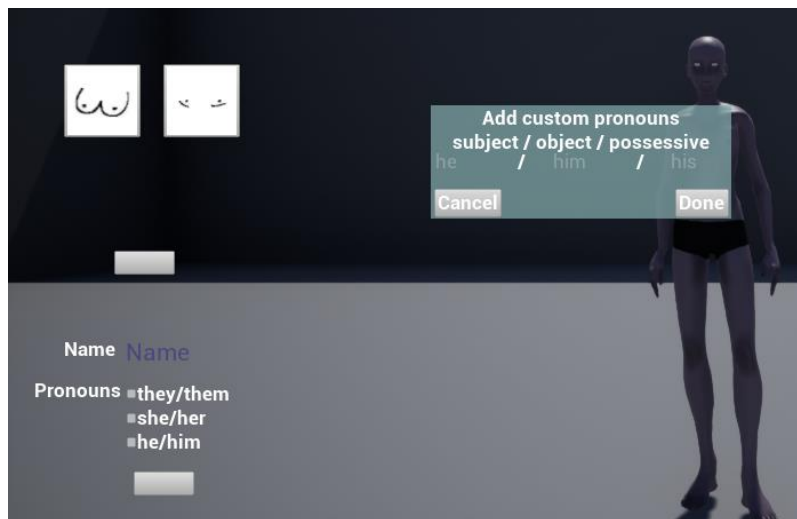
PICTURE 16. Custom pronouns input (note: the given selection of pronouns in the picture is only for testing and in the final version the pronoun selection corresponds with most used pronouns)

It is also important to address the order in which the pronouns are listed in the final version (Picture 17). At first, I did not put too much thought into it, but later realized, that by selecting a certain order for the pronouns it is possible to create a platform for and give more visibility to the pronouns that are usually underrepresented; moreover, by presenting the choices in a fashion where order is not evident (a circle, for example) it is possible to make the options equal. Theory behind it is called choice architecture. Choice architecture is an economical and marketing theory that suggests the consumer's choices and spending are influenced by the way the product is placed (Thaler, Sunstein 2008).

Choice architecture is a detail that has to be acknowledged, especially if the developers seek to design diverse systems that are equal or challenge the norms of male-dominant areas and language.

PICTURE 17. Pronoun selection (left) and adding custom pronuns pop-up window (right)

Coming back to the first question in the checklist – Have I asked for character's pronouns instead of gender? The answer is yes.

7.4 Non-restrictive customization

7.4.1 Base character

Versatile and non-restrictive character creation system equals desirable and accurate gender expression for characters and/or players. Gender expression is how a person (or, in this case, a character) presents their gender to the world. As the conclusion of the chapter 6 states, queer players have found it important for the character creator to have a wide variety of options when it comes to customizing appearance of the characters, therefore I had to design, create, and implement different features that could be applied to the body of the character. Emphasis in this case was on creating a default character that looked androgynous and allowed players to change, add or remove any physical features.

During the development, several factors had to be taken into account, for example, finding the balance between time constraints and the variety of options. Since one of the goals of this character creation system is to showcase a non-restrictive approach to making a character, the number of options is less signifi-

cant than their detachment from gender of the character. Still, the variety is important, as it contributes to more accurate expression of the appearance of the character.

The base character had to look androgynous, and their features had to be easily tweaked in the character creator. To generate the base model for the character I used a Blender add-on MBLab. I modified the 3D model to look as androgynous as possible. I also created a separate model for the breasts that could be attached to the base character model (Picture 18), allowing the player to change the chest type with one click.
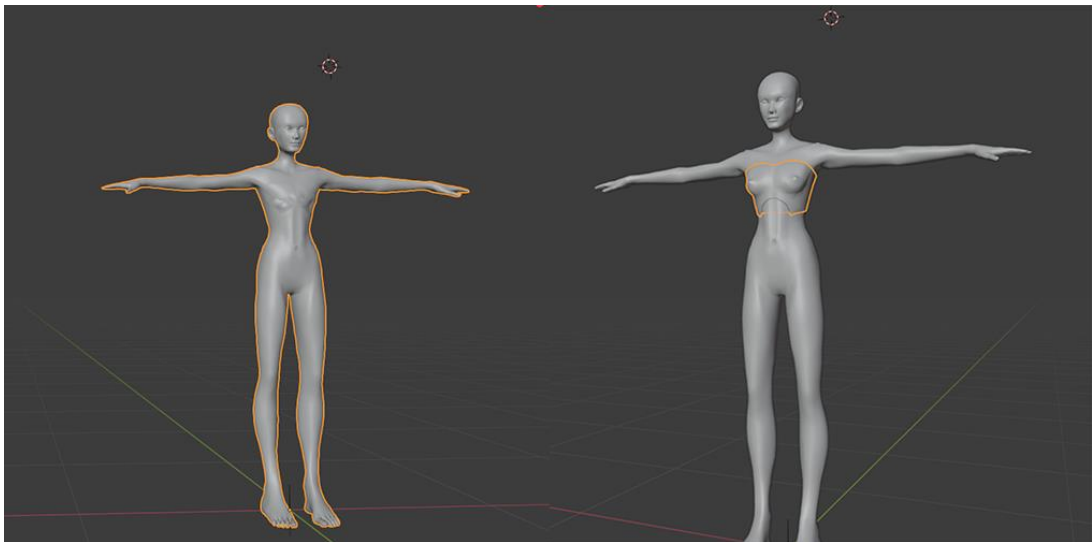
PICTURE 18. Highlighted base character mesh (left) and a highlighted separate chest mesh (right)

To easily change the features of the character in the character creator, I added shape keys to the character model. Shape keys allow to store variations of the base mesh and can be changed at runtime. This makes shape keys a perfect technique for character customization. Each shape key corresponds to a body area of the character, such as waist, chest, neck, nose, etc.
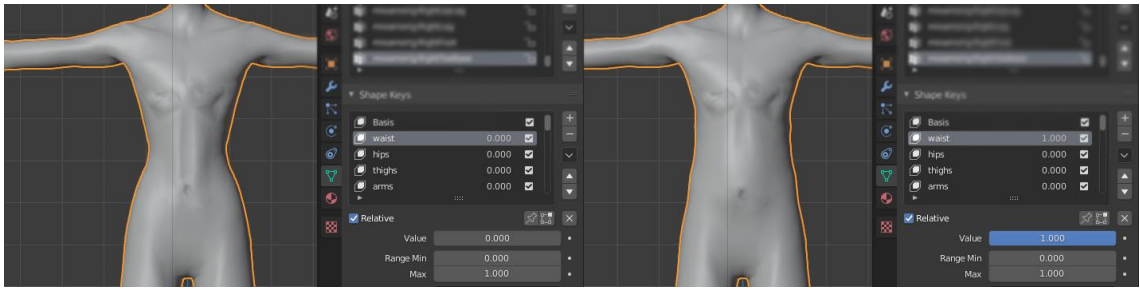
PICTURE 19. Waist shape key controls the size of base character's waist size

In Unreal Engine 4 Shape Keys are called Morph Targets. Identically to the shape keys functionality in Blender, morph targets allow to change features of the character model by changing the morph target's value. In the character creator the values of morph targets are represented via sliders. By changing the value of the slider player can alter the appearance of the character. The first test of the slider system can be seen in Picture 20.


PICTURE 20. First test of the character creation system in Unreal Engine 4

To bind sliders to the morph targets, a Widget Blueprint had to be created. In Unreal Engine 4, widgets are a series of pre-made functions for constructing a user interface, and Widget Blueprints are used to edit the widgets.
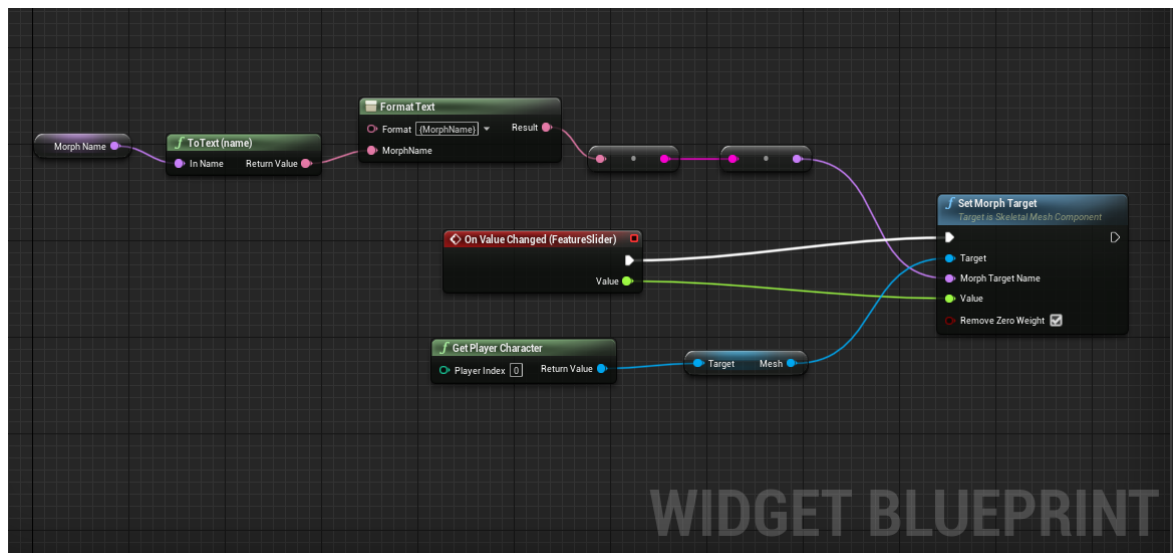
PICTURE 21. Slider blueprint

The Slider Blueprint (Picture 21) takes the name of a morph target (previously created as a shape key in Blender) from the character mesh and binds it to a slider, so the player can change the morph target by changing the value on the slider. Additionally, I created a custom Populate Feature Box function (Picture 22) that automatically adds all the morph targets with corresponding sliders to the user interface.
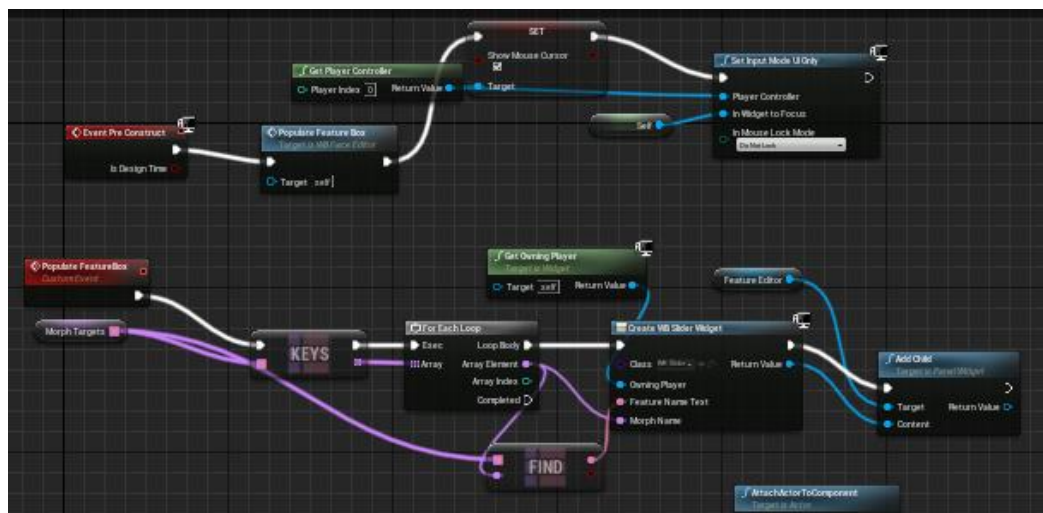
PICTURE 22. Main widget blueprint with Populate Feature Box function

I also added an idle animation for the character, so the character creator looks more dynamic and visually appealing. The character model had to be rigged in order to create or apply animations to the model. Rigging is a process of creating a "skeleton" for the 3D model that allows to manipulate the model like a puppet.

Since rigging and animating the character by hand is a quite time consuming process and is not relevant to the thesis, I decided to use Mixamo automatic rigging and motion capture animation data. Mixamo is a service that offers 3D characters and animations suitable for a variety of projects (Mixamo 2021).

7.4.2 Customizable details

Many of the desired appearance customization options, like scars, tattoos, facial hair, and makeup, have been created through textures. Like the base skin texture, the textures of details had to be painted in greyscale. The tattoo, makeup and facial hair textures were designed after trends of 1930s to keep the style consistent with the RPG concept.

PICTURE 23. Tattoo design based on a tattoo from 1930s

For the player to be able to change skin colour of the character, firstly, I painted a base skin texture for the character. It is made in grayscale (Picture 24), so its colour can be modified in Unreal Engine via colour overlay without losing any skin details (Picture 25).
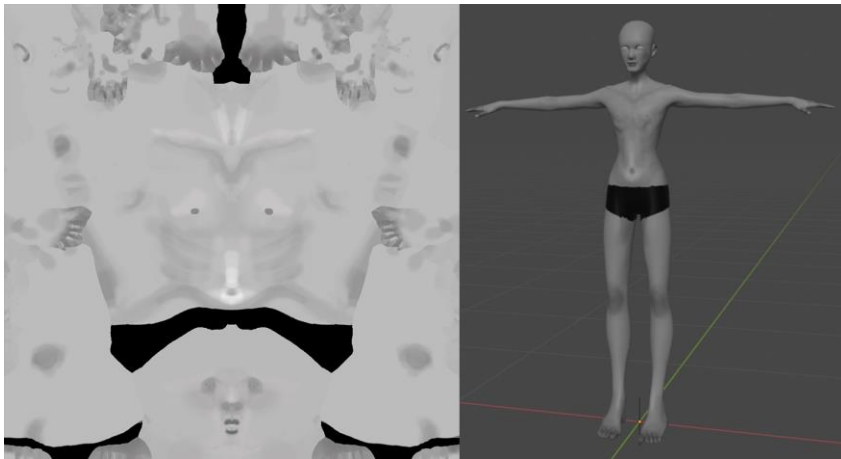
PICTURE 24. Character texture (left) and character texture applied to the character mesh (right)

For the character appearance customization, the master material was created (Picture 26). The master material contains texture slots for customizable elements, such as tattoos, makeup, and scars.

PICTURE 25. Variations of skin colour made with colour overlay

Afterwards the master materials were set up, I created a series of buttons, with each button corresponding to a certain appearance feature. It is possible to change the colour and/or textures of the material with a button by utilizing instanced materials. Instanced materials are used in Unreal Engine 4 to change the appearance of the material without its recompilation, so they are a performance efficient tool for swapping the textures in the material while the game is

running. Similarly structured master materials were also created for hair and eyes.
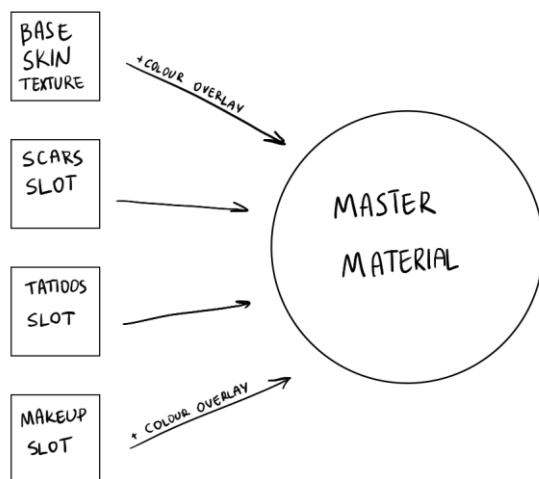
PICTURE 26. An illustration for the master material structure

I created a total of five hairstyles by sculpting a hair mesh with high polygon count and baking a normal map on a hair mesh with low polygon count.
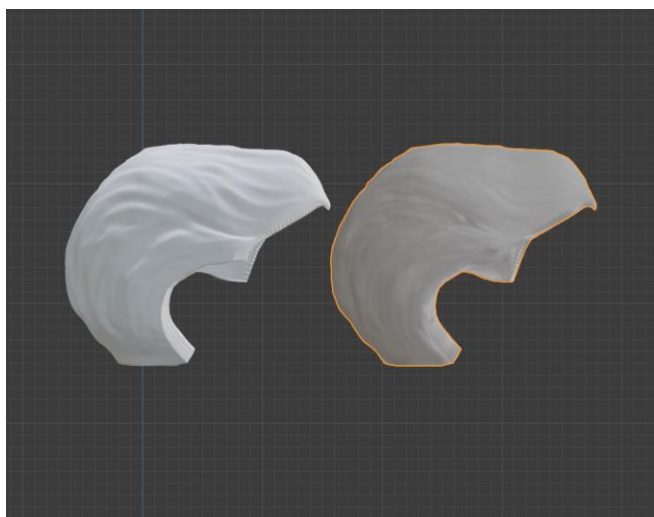
PICTURE 27. High-poly hair model (left) and low-poly hair model with a baked normal map (right)

Elements that could be attached to the character base character model – hair and chest – are spawned when the corresponding button is clicked. They were

parented to the base body skeleton so they could follow the same animations seamlessly.

After implementing customizable features that are not restricted to gender or pronouns chosen for the character, the second question of the checklist – Have I allowed full character customization without restricting any options to certain genders? – can be answered positively.

7.5   Research and community approval

Research and community approval are crucial to avoiding missteps that have been seen with some character creators, like one in Cyberpunk 2077. It requires both preliminary research and receiving feedback during and post- development.

For the preliminary research I relied on case studies, Queerly Represent Me study, as well as my own experience as a non-binary person.

I sent out the character creator in its various development stages to several non-binary individuals and received responses from three of them: A, T, and K. I will use their initials, as they wished to remain anonymous. While I did not have many respondents, it was still important to receive feedback from other non-binary individuals, and not rely only on my own experience as a non-binary person.

With A, the first one to respond, we conducted a playtesting session quite early in the development. T and K tested the character creator by themselves and sent me feedback via text message afterwards. The detailed feedback from the respondents can be found in Appendix 2.

PICTURE 28. Finished character creation screen

Overall received feedback was positive. Persons who have tested the character creator reacted positively to the pronoun choice, as well as the non-restrictive customization options.
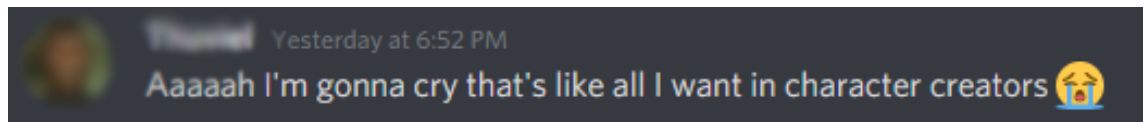
PICTURE 29. Feedback from one of the respondents, T

The respondents liked the possibility to create a variety of both gender non-conforming and gender conforming characters. In addition, they expressed a desire for more options for traditionally masculine body, such as defined musculature, and more varying body types in general, as currently any character option is rather skinny.

Chest scars (Picture 30) were noted to be a well thought detail that is rarely seen in games (according to T).

PICTURE 30. Chest scars checkbox

The choice of neutral language (chest instead of breasts, for example) also received positive comments, as well as absence of options that were referred to as male or female.

There were several remarks on the visual components of the character creator, because the lighting in the scene made light skinned characters look shiny, and some textures (underwear, eyeliner) had artifacts on the edges.

With these comments received I can answer positively to the last question of the checklist – Have I done research and asked for feedback form non-binary players?

7.6   Results

After getting positive feedback from the non-binary folk, it is possible to say that the checklist is a successful method for developing non-binary inclusive character creation systems, or for checking whether the existing character creation system is non-binary inclusive. The checklist can be seen in Table 2.

From the developer's perspective, it is quite easy to follow, although each of the steps requires extra research. This, however, is why there is the last question of the checklist, and doing research, possibly hiring an expert in LGBTQ+ representation, and asking for feedback is important for the character creator (or any media, for that matter) to be truly inclusive.

The final gameplay video of the character creator can be found in Appendix 1.

8 DISCUSSION

The checklist for a non-binary inclusive character creator is a necessary tool for developers that want to make inclusive and diverse games. The non-binary inclusive character creation systems themselves are desired by non-binary individuals and are always met with positive feedback.

However, the representation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities by AAA companies are often seen as tokenism, a gesture to cater to a larger group of consumers, "window dressing" (Chung 2017), perhaps similar to the big companies creating rainbow merchandise (rainbow flag is a symbol of LGBTQ+ community) solely to make profit. Here the desire of the queer community to be seen and accepted clashes with more radical views that reject queer assimilation in favor of creating alternative narratives and experiences that are more than politics of representation. Still, non-binary (and every gender the umbrella includes) is a gender like any other and making a character that reflects the gender of their player should always be an option.

There is also another aspect of the checklist that needs to be discussed further – translation and localization to different languages. Fortunately for non-binary folk, English language allows for non-gendered use of verbs and has good options for non-gendered pronouns. Many other languages do not have these options.

It is interesting to observe how, for example, Bloodhound (BioWare 2019) is described on Apex Legends official website. The English version uses pronouns they/them extensively, while the Russian version avoids pronouns and verbs in past tense, swapping Bloodhound's pronouns to gender neutral nouns, such as "дитя" ([ditjá], "child"), and restructuring sentences to change the subjects.

The solution to these localization issues is yet to be found, and meanwhile the character creator checklist must stay focused on the English speaking non-binary individuals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Character creator gameplay video

https://youtu.be/Q62E1jUgTv0

Appendix 2. Community feedback

Feedback received from T via text message:

> I love that there's no "choose your gender", it just opens up to creating a character right away and all the options are available, nothing is locked to an initial choice of gender. The lack of gendered language is also really nice, the fact that it's just called chest option 1 and 2, nothing about female/male chests, even just the neutral word "chest" instead of using boobs/breasts is really nice to see. Same for the private parts, it was cool to have that option and the neutral language around it. And the inclusion of top surgery scars is even cooler, rarely does a game let you design a trans character with visible scars. Absolutely blown away by the option for not only choosing they/them pronouns, but even the choice to add custom pronouns if none of the suggested ones fit!! There was a good range of skin colours too, and the option to have "unnatural" skin colours too was cool! The only thing I would be missing is more varying body types, cause even with the sliders to max it was still a fairly skinny person, and not all the body parts scaled up equally (the torso always remained slim aside from the hips). But I totally get that there's limitations to how much you can do with one character model, it would just be a wish to make it even better c:

Quinn, character created by T

A playtested the very first version of the character creator, where the user interface was still work in progress.

Feedback received from A (transcribed):

> Oh, this is really cool. Let's see, name, MbyzzX. Pronouns, hmm, she.. check.. xe.. check. I can add my own? That's cool. Hm, what pronouns are there... Fae? Nice. Fae. (Inpecting skin colour options) Oh, I can scroll here? Yeah, this is not very intuitive. Love the skin colours. Mm, grey, yes. Chest scars? Oh, post-op [post-gender affirming surgery]. This is a very well thought-out detail. Private parts (laughs). Love the tattoos! Edgiest scars for MbyzzX. This [the character creator] is definitely something you should put in your portfolio. (Inspecting editable face features) I can scroll here too? Yeah, yeah, it's hard to see that I can, as with the other scroll boxes. I can't rotate the character? Love the pink eyes. Moustache, nice. This is a very bright lipsitick. Of course there is a teardrop tattoo. Yes for teardrop tattoo. Love the edgy scars (laughs). (Choosing hairstyle and colour) Yes, yes!

MbyzzX, character created by A

Feedback received from K via text message:

> - you can choose multiple pronouns ++! That's very nice.
> - the custom pronoun creator is rly easy to use. Looks dashing, and functions professionally! Simple and intuitive. Must be my favorite thing in the scene though I don't use the less-common-pronouns myself.
> - Both bodily and facial features editor is well thought. With a few sliders you get quite a good variation on the bodily shape & does a very good job mixing masculine bodily and facial features with feminine ones. Not sure if there's room to add more value to the extreme values on the sliders, but the meshes seem like that they could even take "more" without looking silly!

(continues)

Personal remarks: I really liked the option to make my character completely flat. Usually the feminine characters in rpgs and mmorpgs are so hyper-sexualized that even the smallest breast sizes in the editors tends to be huge and unsettling.

Made me think: to design for the needs of people from different gender-backgrounds/identities it is important to have the designers educated on the topic. The easiest way to achieve this is to hire designers from the demographic themselves, since they more likely grasp and relate to the needs of peeps from personal experience and have a personal interests to act on them. This editor seems to support that. It seems to – with very little – but well-thought effort, debunk many of the "no-can-dos" from the game-dev-field you keep hearing all the time. "Excuses to exclude".

In short: the structure is so well thought that it makes inclusivity seem easy :D

Small dev suggestions/ remarks: (not sure If you're going to keep on developing this after the thesis, but if you are, here's some polishing suggestions / remarks I made!)

- lighter skin tones are quite shiny, it makes seeing the tattoos, moustache etc. a little bit hard!
- not sure if you've caught this, but eyeliners, moustaches seem to have white borders on darker skin tones
- option to rotate the character would be nice : >
- the button area of the face/body/hair menus could be expanded to reach the arrows. (I constantly kept clicking on them : '----D)

Otherwise, the Ui works really nicely! Njöm. Me likey.

Character created by K