

The Impact of Character Creation and Customization on Self-Expression and Identity in RPGs

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Abstract:

While a large of research investigates the importance of character creation and customization in role-playing games (RPGs) on players' motivation and enjoyment to play, little is known about the impact of character creation and customization on players' self-expression and identity exploration. Video games have been a venue for both developers and gamers to explore complex stories and ideas. Role-playing games (RPGs) are a type of video game in which players can take the role of a character in a fictional setting and interact with the game's narrative. This paper is part of a larger research on the construction of individual identities using RPG character creation and customization. Building upon existing research on identity adaptation theory, queer theory, the proteus effect theory, and the performance of identity, this paper finds that players' choices of character creation and customization contribute to opportunities for self-expression and individual agency. This paper also examines the character Creation and Customization preferences among different demographic groups and the association between in-game identity and real-life self-perception and social behaviors of players.

Keywords: Role-playing games; Video games; character creation.

1. Introduction

Video games have been a venue for both developers and gamers to explore complex stories and ideas. Role-playing games (RPGs) are a type of video game in which players can take the role of a character in a fictional setting and interact with the game's narrative. In RPGs, players do not develop their characters randomly. Numerous studies have found that character creation and customization give players opportunities for self-expression and individual agency [1, 2]. To be more specific, RPGs have become a safe place in which players can explore their identities and experiment with or perform new or meagering identities. The freedom of self-expression and identity construction has significance beyond the in-game context. According to Huynh, players are highly motivated to transfer important aspects of their in-game identities to "social reality" and achieve this by "migrating their in-game identities into real life" [3]. This identity expression creates new meaningful cultures in the gaming community. According to Flueggen et al., RPGs allow individuals to be themselves and find groups that accept players as they are [2]. Gonzalo-Iglesia et al. suggest that through self-expression and self-representation, players find effective ways to relate to games and other players [4]. This paper will examine how

players in RPGs express their identity through character creation and customization. First, this paper concludes essential ways players utilize character creation and customization to reflect their real-life identities and explore alternative identities. Second, this paper examines specific character creation and customization preferences among different demographic groups. Third, this paper explores the relationship between in-game identity expression real-life social behaviors, and self-perception.

2. Character Creation and Identity Exploration

In RPGs, players utilize character creation and customization for self-expression and identity performance. Typically, the character creation and customization in RPGs reflect three characteristics of identity performance. First, some players utilize character creation and customization to reflect their real-life identities. Many characters developed by players are very similar to the players themselves. Bowman suggests that many character types in RPGs are largely similar to players with some changes such as players having certain magnified traits and exhibiting some superpower [5]. The character can't be exactly like the player. Players may develop the character of an elf, a rogue, or a magic user, but the characters share similar personalities

with the players. Players take the actions of characters as the ones they choose for themselves. Those characters embody the traits and personal characteristics of the players themselves. According to Nielsen, the types of characters similar to players provide a good opportunity for players to learn about themselves [6]. In in-game scenarios, individuals may not encounter in the real world such as saving a village, defeating a monster, or overcoming adversaries. By putting themselves into action, players can learn about their personality traits, ideals, and flaws and achieve personal development extending beyond games.

Second, some players tend to create idealized versions of themselves and explore identities that they cannot express in real life. While exploration and expression of identity may be socially or financially taxing out of the game, RPGs play a good opportunity to experiment with a new or different identity. Even if players have similar in-game goals, they may achieve their goals and explore spaces through different ways of character creation and customization.

Navarro-Remesal points out that the in-game identities chosen by players are formed based on the real-world identities and desires of players long before the play begins [7]. In the games, players usually customize their avatars that allow them to perform specific body, gender, and sex identities. RPGs provide players with a safe space in which they feel comfortable to talk about gender and sexuality. In real life, those who have gender identities or sexualities beyond the established social norms often feel a sense of otherness [8]. In RPGs, the feeling of otherness can be explored and reduced through the identity of an avatar. Many MMORPGs allow players to choose their own gender identity or sexualities. LGBTQ+ often utilize RPGs as a space to explore queerness through the safety of avatars [8]. Some players consider RPGs a comfortable and useful method to explore their gender identity before they come out [9]. A male player who has gender dysphoria may choose to play a game using a female avatar. Players can also perform their desired gender identity through various means such as clothing, accessories, language, hair, and graphic images. By manipulating avatars on their intentions, players increase their agency.

Third, in RPGs, some types of characters developed by a player are opposite to the player's identity. According to Bowman, as characters develop and role-play is nurtured in a fully immersive environment, players can perceive their characters increasingly as a distinct identity that is separate from their primary identity or the real-world self [5]. This effect can have a lot of effects on the primary identity of players, a phenomenon known as "bleed" [10]. Generally speaking, bleed refers to the transfer of thoughts and feelings between players and characters. For exam-

ple, if a character falls in love with another character and bleeding occurs, this means that those feelings are shared with the player, who may fall in love with the character or the player who performs the character. When emancipatory bleed occurs, players usually construct an identity opposite to their real-world one. Emancipatory bleeding is the feeling of liberation developed when being freed from self-imposed oppression or social oppression [10]. In RPGs, players who were once bullied in their childhood and unable to fight back in real life may take the role of a superhero who can defeat monsters and villains, and a player who fears speaking up in the workplace or public can play a character in a leadership role. Sometimes, a careful or honest player can choose to be an impulsive rogue, a meticulous planner may become a chaotic Wild Magic Sorcerer, and some may lay an evil alignment, giving into every negative action or thought. In all the above cases, players choose to play character types as a rebellion against their real-world selves who are subject to restrictions and oppressions the players or the society places on them. By letting them take action opposite to the one they take in real life, play the darker side of themselves, and break rules, players create a new identity that allows them to temporarily escape from reality.

3. Character Customization Preferences of Different Demographic Groups

To figure out the character customization preferences among different demographic groups, it is necessary to figure out who are the major gamers of RPGs. Straight male gamers are the target audience of many RPGs [6]. Besides, there is a substantial number of women who play RPG games. According to the Entertainment Software Association, around 42% of gamers are women adult women account for 37% of the gaming population, and teenage boys aged 17 or younger comprise around 13% of the gaming population [6]. In the games, players can choose a race. In RPGs, race is different from the sociological notion of race. In RPGs, race refers to a different species; typical races are dwarf, elf, gnome, and human. Besides, players can also choose a gender and class (healer, mage, scout, and warrior). Players can also choose accessories, clothing, hair, skin tone, physical appearance, talent and power sets.

Customizing a character's physical appearance has different impacts on the interests of male and female players in RPGs. Compared with male players, customizing characters' physical appearance has a much more significant influence on female players' preference for RPGs.

According to Turkey and Adinolf, while 85.29% of female players enjoy customizing characters' physical appear-

ance, only 64.87% of male players report that physical appearance is important customization for them [11]. In addition, female players view character appearance as their favorite customization. This finding is consistent with the fact that women tend to place more importance on appearance than men in real life, in other words, physical appearance plays a larger role in influencing women's self-identification than men [12].

Talents and power sets are important aspects of customization in some RPGs. Talent trees are one of the unique aspects of customization in World of Warcraft (WoW). As players spend points in a talent tree, new rows of talents will unlock and players can gain special abilities and talents that enhance game characters in various ways. According to Turkey and Adinolf, 71% of all players of WoW rate talents and power sets as very important customization that affect their interest in the game [11]. Compared with female players, male players are more interested in talents and power sets [11]. For players, customizing talents or power sets is important because it allows them to choose what they want their characters to do or achieve in the game. As players often put themselves into the actions of characters for self-expression and identity expression, it can be said that customizing talents and power sets provide more opportunities for players to experiment with new identities and explore alternative identities.

4. In-Game Identity and Real-Life Self-Perception and Social Behaviors

The ways players construct and express their in-game identities can reflect their self-perceptions and social behaviors in real life. Two keywords are vital to understanding the association between players in-game identity and their real-life self-perception and social behaviors. The first keyword is escapism. Escapism refers to the motivation to draw oneself from troubled reality and sometimes fantasize about oneself as better, more important, and better off than in real life [13]. According to Larche et al., playing to escape is the most common motive among the players of RPGs [14]. Many players create an in-game identity that does not align with the identity they are perceived as in the real world. This frequently occurs among players with gender dysphoria. In real life, many players struggle to conform to gender-normative rules. The RPGs provide them with a safe place where they can freely choose a character of a different gender or biological sex to break the rules. In this way, they try to escape from the self-imposed social pressure caused by the gender binary in real life. Another example is that a female player chooses to be an aggressive male character, which reflects her desire to break traditional gender expectations imposed on

women.

The other keyword is avatar identification. Numerous studies have found that the influence of avatar identification extends beyond the virtual world [15, 16]. Szolin et al. point out that the avatar can shape a player's behaviors and attitudes during and after gameplay [17]. According to the Proteus effect, the traits of avatars can affect individual behaviors and cognition [18]. The Proteus effect points out that players can learn from their avatars. To what extent players are willing to learn from their avatars is associated with player personality traits. For instance, openness to experience can drive players to be more willing to learn from avatars, and self-monitoring traits drive players to be more willing to adapt their behaviors based on changes in the environment [18]. Players with a high level of empathy are more likely to report a decrease in implicit racial bias after being assigned a black avatar than the players with a lower level of empathy [18].

5. Conclusion

Character creation and customization in RPGs are closely associated with players' self-expression and identity construction both in the virtual world and in real life. On the one hand, players may customize characters whose identity align with their real-life identity or represent an idealized version of their self-identity. This tendency reflects players' identification with their real-life identity. On the other hand, players may customize characters opposite to their real-life identities. This occurs when players want to escape from the troubled reality, free themselves from self-imposed or social pressure, and explore alternative identities. Character creation and customization in PRGs provide researchers with a window through which they can further delve into the psychology of players. This paper gives an overview of the relationship between in-game identity and players' real-life gender identity and sexualities. In the future, researchers can enrich this research field by detailing how players' in-game identity is related to more facets of their real-life identity including race, social class, nationality, and ethnicity.

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