Invisibility Blues 1.2: I Am (Not) My Avatar: Race and Identification in Video Games

In our last video, When Race is on the Menu, we looked at human character creation in various games, from various developers, spanning various genres. We did this to explore the possibilities and limitations when it comes to creating racially diverse game characters.

In this follow-up video, rather than looking at character creation in general, we set out to create representations of ourselves in specific games: Mass Effect 3, Dragon Age: Inquisition, and Fallout 4, released November, 2015, as the most recent. Looking at character creation in this way allows us to see a progression in terms of presentation and possibility across game types, engines and console generations. This approach also allows us to more thoroughly explore realism in character creation, not from an abstract sense, but from a more personal angle, as gamers who often seek to find ourselves within the worlds we enter.

In our last episode, "Race is on the Menu," we touched on this idea with Shareef Jackson of #Gaminglooksgood, who discussed his own struggles with Black male avatars and how things have changed for him as he has attempted to recreate his own facial hair on avatars. Shareef ultimately found that a more accurate representation is possible in sports games than in games of other genres. In this episode, we are exploring avatar creation from the point of view of a Black woman, a white woman, and a biracial woman, in order to ask: can we find ourselves in these games? Are we here?

Obviously, a 1:1 rendering of each person is not possible, no matter how extensive the character creation process, but what we're looking for here is something that feels representative, true to our features and our individual characteristics… or at least a stylized version of ourselves. Being able to find ourselves in games, as many scholars have pointed out, is important for a variety of reasons.

As I discussed in our last episode, my character in Mass Effect 3 is one that I have felt most connected with when playing games in quite a while. This was because I felt like I could see myself more in her and the way that her story unfolded as I played the game. For the purposes of this video I took the time to start a new Mass Effect 3 playthrough and found that while I could create an avatar that had facial features and hair similar to my own that I could not create characteristics that extended past the traditional Western beauty ideals.

For example, the darkest skin tone was still one to two shades too light for my own and I could not adequately reflect the wisdom in my own face (in other words wrinkles were specifically not allowed) which is made even stranger because there were numerous NPCs in the game that did have older looking faces. I also found it interesting that while I do have short natural hair that the only natural style available was a faded hairstyle that is traditionally worn by African American men. The biggest issue for me was the fact that all female Commander Shephards are only allowed one body type, small waisted, tight breasted, and muscular forms. It should be noted that male Shephards are also only allowed one form, but rather than being the sexualized form it is moreso an idealized form.

Many of Sam's problems are just not mine. No matter the game, there's always hair that is textured like mine — mostly straight, sometimes a little wavy—a nose like mine, and for my partner, the option of a beard or a balding character. I can find my hair color, my eye color, a skin tone close enough to mine to be acceptable. It's never a challenge to create some version of me, and if she's

thinner or has better skin, well, at least there are elements that show up that I can recognize and identity with.

Of course, sometimes it gets closer than others. Here, in Fallout 4, I was only able to find hair that was somewhat similar to my own, and skin tone, and some facial features. I guess the best I can say of this version of "me" is that it might be what I looked like if someone played me in a movie. So not very successful, but I don't feel alienated from this representation, either.

We spoke with fellow NYMG staffer Ashley Velazquez about her experiences as a bi-racial woman returning to gaming and creating characters that looked like her for the first time.

Interview snippet: Ashley J. Velázquez

But Destiny's character creation is stripped down. What happened when Ashley tried to make a character like her in another game, last year's Fallout 4?

To get a better idea of the differences in representation across these racial lines, we attempted to make each one of us in Dragon Age: Inquisition, since outside of the issues we identified in the last video with Black male facial hair, that character creation system seemed to have the most potential for realism… at least, before we started.

Dragon Age: Inquisition gave me a little more freedom than some of the other systems, thanks to their more elaborate graph system, allowing for deeper customization of certain features. Hair was simple, because my hair is on the shorter end, but I was able to closely match my hair color, and get a cut that resembled one I've had in the t past, which surprised me. I couldn't quite get the shape of my mouth, but I was able to create a rounder face than in most games, to match my cheeks and face shape. In fact, the final version was so eerily like me that I started sending screen caps to friends. I was tempted to it my Twitter avatar.

It was so easy, and so realistic, that I exited and began again, this time rendering my partner, who is a heavily bearded, balding white man. The results were the same: I was able to create a very reasonable representation, with nose, eyes, face shape, and skin tone, as well as hair color. I couldn't quite capture his hair, as he has more hair than most standard "bald guy" looks, I did notice that I could create many bald men. You can be bald in all kinds of ways, and have many different kinds of beards, in Dragon Age: Inquisition.

And while my foray into character creation with Mass Effect 3 was pretty successful, trying to create a version of myself in Dragon Age: Inquisition was truly an exercise in failure. While I was able to choose darker skin than I was for Mass Effect 3, I was still not able to choose a natural hairstyle that was short and feminine, but was rather limited to the equivalent of a high-ish top fade and trying to add lines of wisdom to my face just left me looking like I had just had all of my wisdom teeth pulled. I also found it interesting that in a game that has so many characters of different heights and body sizes that I was not able to customize my body type in any way, much less in a way to reflect my own actual form.

Since Sam and I had such different experiences in creating characters in Dragon Age: Inquisition, I called Ashley and told her I was going to attempt to create her. After her attempts in Fallout 4, she didn't expect much, and she was right - while I could match the shape of her eyes quite closely, and create a realistic version of her nose, the lack of curly hair or realistic-looking dark hair absolutely

killed the character. No matter what I tried, even with some features that matched, I could not create Ashley. Head hair, it turns out, is also deeply important, as important as skin tone, when it comes to creating even a loose representation of a person.

So what does this reveal about character creation? Nothing we didn't learn in our first video, really, but here, it's more personal. It's one thing to go through a number of games and filter for skin tones and hairstyles, and another to see actual people struggling just to find their place in a created world. It's time we realized this is important, not only to us, but to the industry as a whole, not just based on current market research, which is predicated by nature on a lot of assumptions, but on potential. Yes, everyone is different. Yes, a white male teenager has a different experience in character creation than an older Latinx trying to create herself in game than an African American man, even if they ostensibly seek similar gameplay experiences. But here it is -- here are some of these different experiences, no longer abstract, but specific.

On the development side, there are considerations that are vastly different from what we think about, both as players -- as part of a target audience -- and as scholars performing critique. For studios juggling budget considerations and changing demands and focus group data, every face option may just look like another expense. Add one more option, and that's money that can't go elsewhere; add different hair options, and maybe the story suffers, or the end sequence, or a particular set of weapons everyone loves doesn't get developed. But the audience-centered result may be then that an African American man loads up the game and sighs upon discovering that, once again, there's not a good option to reflect him in the game. That once again he settles for something else. The Latinx can't quite match her hair, or her body. And maybe they play a little less. Maybe next time they don't buy the game. Maybe they start renting. Maybe they play indies instead. No one knows, because we can't track potential audience... or what might happen if things changed.

Yes, it would be great if we could realistically create anyone and everyone in a game, but of course, that isn't fiscally possible for any game, much less every game with some sort of character creation aspect. But what we see, as with so many other aspects of game design, is that the corners that get cut are features unique to people of color, and of marginalized body types. Maybe in shooters there's little difference in body types due to hitboxes and balance; maybe in RPGs it's due to money, the fit of armor and the equipping of weapons, and how hair moves and flows along with the character. Maybe there is no one on staff who thinks about the nuance of minority facial features. The whys will differ from game to game and studio to studio. We do know deeper character creation, with more customizable features is possible, thanks to games like the MMORPG Black Desert, with its highly nuanced system for hair, skin, features, and bodies. And though even that system doesn't include as many options for hair texture as it could, in order to achieve even more realism, games like Black Desert allow us to visualize a more inclusive future.

For now, though, we're often stuck with the same range of hair styles and the same limited skin tones. And many people believe that this is because the main audience is white, male, and only interested in certain body types. That's the perceived audience of today. But we can measure that, and how it's changing, ahead of and around game design. What we can't measure is what would happen if games skewed more toward featuring other design and creation choices.

In our next episode we will talk criticism. What is it? Who does it and what does it all mean? Find out next time on Invisibility Blues.