

**Using Research Driven Design to Reimagine Systems of
Gender in Final Fantasy XIV**

by

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Abstract

This study explores gender modeling specifically in avatar creation tools through the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV*. The design of systems is often limited by the experiences of those who build them. In the video game industry; this means that systems are often designed by white, cisgender, heterosexual men. This demographic does not represent the wealth of people who play games and are subjected to these systems. The needs of marginalized communities, especially queer communities, in terms of affordances and representation tend to be overlooked or forgotten. This issue is apparent in avatar creation tools which define the types of bodies and identities that are allowable in the world of the game. Using Brenda Laurel's research driven design tactics, modifications to *Final Fantasy XIV's* current system were realized through a paper prototype and constant input from a group of self-identifying queer players. Both the feedback from these queer players and the modifications made to the prototype were condensed into a series of suggestions for the creators of these tools. Ultimately, I discovered that there are three key features which vastly improve the affordances of character creators for queer players; the inclusion of pronoun identification, the identification of gender identity, and the separation of both of these options from the character's physical appearance. Designers who implement these findings in their work will contribute to creating environments that support queer identities.

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Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) consist of large worlds, intricate quest lines and diverse communities of players. Many facets of MMORPGs are designed to be completed in the context of a group; instanced dungeons, challenging side quests, and player-vs.-player arenas. Additionally, each zone is populated by other players piloting avatars into droves of monsters or NPCs. With a platform that relies so heavily on social interaction, a player's avatar becomes an integral component of their identity (Cacioli & Mussap, 2014). However, current character creation tools do not allow players to capture a realistic variety of bodies and identities. The selection of an avatar's gender is often a binary one that is reliant on secondary sex characteristics. Depending on complex cultural variables, male characters tend to be represented with stereotypical, hyper-muscular frames while female characters tend to be represented with slender, scantily clad ones. Options for skin tone and hair texture are frequently white-washed or nonexistent (Dietrich, 2013). Players who belong to marginalized communities may find it difficult to create an avatar that they can identify with. While all the aforementioned shortcomings of these tools warrant their own individual study, in this project, I focus on gender declaration systems. The object of this study is on one specific MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XIV* (abbreviated to *FFXIV*; Square Enix, 2010), selected due to the depth of its avatar creation tool. I use research design practices to iteratively incorporate the tacit knowledge of self-identifying, active, queer players in the reimagination of *FFXIV*'s existing avatar creation tool. The purpose of this reimagination is to extract a set of inclusive design principles applicable to a wide variety of avatar creations tools.

The population of transgender people in the United States is estimated to be 0.39% which translates to a substantial 1.28 million citizens (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). When we consider

the archival work of scholars such as Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem, representation of transgender, non-binary, and intersex characters in games has been problematic or nonexistent (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). A Nielsen study discovered that 65% of LGBT game playing respondents did not feel that all sexual orientations have ample representation or inclusion in video game characters (Nielsen, 2015). This is a marginalized community that is consistently underserved in explicit support or representation (Cole, Shaw & Zammit, 2017). Scholars, such as Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, have championed the queer game studies movement in academic spaces in response to the systemic exclusion of queer perspectives in ludic spaces (Ruberg, 2017). This scholarship tends to examine video games through the lens of queer theory (Ruberg, 2019). These close readings of games as text, while massively important to create space for queerness in games, do not address the need for representation. One of the major motivation factors for players of MMORPGs in character creation is identity representation (Lin & Wang, 2014). Players of games with non-normative identities should not immediately be denied the opportunity to portray a “queer” self in the game world they inhabit. In the context of this project, queer is used an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community as letter acronyms have the potential to be exclusive.

This document serves not only as an argument for the importance of this work but also as accompaniment to the development of the paper prototype. In the Literature Review section, I examine how the existing scholarship surrounding avatar creation tools has informed my understanding of their analysis and shortcomings. Following these two sections are the results of both the participant screening survey and initial, personal interviews which unpacks who participated in this study and what their experiences with *Final Fantasy XIV* have been. The Gender Modeling System section details the final evolution of the prototype and discuss various

modifications made while testing. The Conclusion section condenses the aftermath of the prototype into a set of inclusive design suggestions and acknowledges the shortcomings of this project. The Appendix contains the scripts from the interview sessions.

Literature Review

This project deliberately explores the limitations of systems of gender in avatar creation tools due to the poor portrayal of gender diverse characters in video games. *Final Fantasy XIV* serves as an excellent venue for this line of research due to the depth of its appearance dependent systems.

Final Fantasy XIV

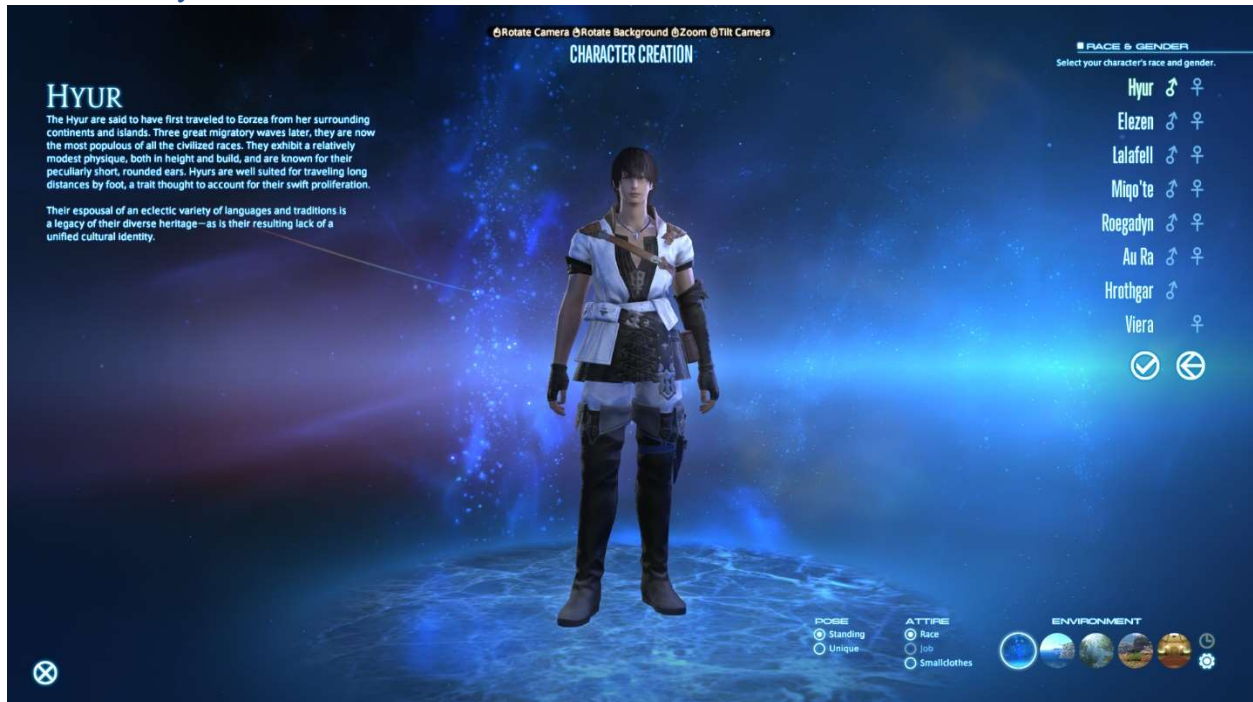


Figure 1: Picture of Final Fantasy XIV avatar creation tool

Final Fantasy XIV is a Japanese MMORPG with, as of October 2019, has 5,050,192 characters across all game servers and worlds (Price, 2019). Avatar customization and appearance serves as an integral component of the game's overall experience. When a user creates a character, the first selection they make is a combined one; their character's race and gender. Characters can simply be either male or female denoted with the two stereotypical Greek sex symbols. The avatar creation tool itself is filled with lore to help players inform their decision (figure 1). As players continue to alter their character's appearance, they have access to

25-27 (depending on race) different customization options including the character's birthday, patron deity, and jaw size.



Figure 2: Final Fantasy XIV glamour system

This character creation process is not encountered just one time, but every time a player purchases and uses a Phial of Fantasia, visits the aesthetician, or hires a new retainer. It is also an aspect of the game which serves as a sizeable revenue stream for Square Enix through these Phials of Fantasia. These are potions that allow players to alter anything about their character's bodies in the avatar creation tool. They allow the player to change their avatar's race, gender, and any number of the aforementioned physical attributes. The aesthetician is a hair stylist who allows players to purchase new hairstyles, face paint or makeup with in-game currency. A retainer is an NPC which runs entrepreneurial errands for the player character. The appearance of this NPC is fully customizable by the player. Not only this, but the game contains an in-depth "glamour" system (figure 2), which allows players to completely alter the appearance of different

sets of armor as well as change its color with dyes. *FFXIV* was chosen as the object of study for this project purely for the wealth and importance of its customization options.

Although the game is developed in Japan, it maintains a global audience. In this project, the participants of the study are specifically English speaking, self-identifying queer players in the United States. It's worth noting that due to the time and resource constraints of the researcher, Japanese queer players will not be included in this study. This does, admittedly, complicate the findings as they represent a western critique of eastern systems and gender expression. These critiques are still valuable because they, regardless, illustrate generalized desires of queer video game players in the context of gender modeling and expression.

Massive Multiplayer Online Games and Socializing

As mentioned in the introduction, key to the experience of MMORPGs is socialization and the completion of various activities with other people. Ducheneaut and Moore (2004) posit that these games are designed to encourage player-to-player interaction in short bursts in designated, highly trafficked areas, such as capital cities. However, the research of Trepte, Reinecke and Juechems (2012) suggest that players form social bonds, which have the potential to go much deeper than short, objective-driven, transactional relationships. They argue that relationships founded in virtual spaces are more likely to be meaningful and flourish if communication extends past the world of the game. This is crucial since studies have shown if those with marginalized identities are able to join social groups which share that marginalized identity, that identity is automatically accepted (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). If queer identities, identities which exist under the LGBTQIAP+ umbrella and are not considered normative, were able to be expressed in these worlds by players, it increases the potential for these safe and supportive communities to form.

Avatar Creation Tools

Scholarship surrounding player avatars and avatar creation tools can be organized into two categories; avatar embodiment and critique. The first grouping explores how players construct their identities in virtual worlds and then how they behave or feel according to those constructed identities. The second grouping systematically identifies ways in which avatar creation tools fail to provide adequate representation for marginalized communities.

Avatar embodiment can be described as the emotional connection that players have with the digital characters they control (Peachey & Childs, 2011). T. L. Taylor (2002, p. 51) explains, “Ultimately, digital bodies tell the world something about your self. They are a public signal of who you are. They also shape and help make real how users internally experience their selves.” She continues to expound, “What mattered most to users... was how much the representation allows them to immerse themselves in the environment – how much it feels ‘right’ and fosters their connection to an avatar” (Taylor, 2002, p. 52). When considering Sherry Turkle’s (1994) work surrounding the connection of the use of computers to explore identity issues that deal with control and mastery, it makes sense that an avatar would be the optimal venue.

Many sources which unpack embodiment discuss the role of the theory of Self-Discrepancy. This theory suggests that a person’s well-being is closely tied to the difference between their actual self and their ideal self (Bessière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007). The higher that this difference is, the worse someone feels about themselves. Players make identities which have more features and traits in common with their ideal selves (Cacioli & Mussap, 2014). Kai Baldwin argues that that for specifically transgender players, video game avatars are a means to escape the physical limitations of their body (Baldwin, 2019). These desirable bodies can only be defined by the options that are available in these avatar creation tools. Through the absence of

transgender representation, it reinforces the problematic notion that transgender bodies are not desirable or could never be ideal.

It has been established, that representation within these tools is lacking, especially in terms of race. Through a survey of character creation tools, David Dietrich makes the argument that video games have created a white habitus in which racial minorities simply were not considered and do not exist (Dietrich, 2013). Urquhart et al. (2009) argue that the translation of these cultural norms is not neutral in its treatment and representation of the constructions of gender and race and, therefore, should be addressed. Scholars have built analysis frameworks, such as the Avatar Affordances Framework to be able to compare different creation tools in terms of their diversity (McArthur, Teather & Jenson, 2015). This particular framework is Human-Computer Interaction driven, focused just as much on the presentation of an option as its content. It was discovered that in all creation tools analyzed with this framework, the option for gender selection involved some form of binary option. These options were tagged with descriptors like, “Gender,” “Sex,” and “Hormones” (McArthur & Jenson, 2015). It is also worth noting that these avatar creation tools require the user to have a certain literacy to construct visually appealing or acceptable avatars (Kafai, Fields & Cook, 2010). While the synthesis of these tools in terms of their affordances for diversity and their accessibility is necessary, it is not enough. This work could be expanded by identifying specific ways these tools could improve their inclusivity rather than by passing a systematic judgement. This is the opportunity for growth that I address in this project.

Research Methodology

As an overview, the study was structured as follows:

1. Search for and screen interview candidates
 - Via a survey sent to *FFXIV* LGBTQ+ free companies and advertised on social media
2. Conduct experiential interviews
 - These are hour long interviews which are designed to understand how queer players interact with *FFXIV* and its avatar creation tool
3. Analyze data and develop paper prototype
 - Translate qualitative data into modifications to *FFXIV*'s current system and model it with a paper prototype for testing
4. Conduct user testing with paper prototype
 - Six individual, iterative sessions are held
 - Feedback is gathered verbally and in the form of a survey
5. Analyze data and revise paper prototype
 - The prototype is revised after each testing session, the feedback directing the modifications made to the prototype
6. Condense player desires and prototype feedback into design inclusivity framework and suggestions

The research design of this proposed project is inspired by Brenda Laurel's research driven design theory which involves developing a deep understanding of audience through continual, personal interaction and experimentation (Laurel, 2003). Laurel used this design process to develop games for girls at Purple Moon, attending to their investigated interests and inclinations (Kocurek, 2017). In this study I employed, on a smaller scale over a shorter time period, the same basic principles. Queer players' experiences with the current system, not speculation, fueled the realization of the prototype.

This study was advertised online to self-identifying queer players of *Final Fantasy XIV*. Calls for participation were shared on two the prominent social media platforms Twitter and

Facebook. The posting on Facebook was to a closed group of game studies scholars while the posting on Twitter was entirely public. A notice about this study was also given to a self-advertised LGBTQ+ *Final Fantasy XIV* free company, “M. E. G. A.” (Make Eorzea Gay Again), and Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s LGBTQ+ activism club, The Alliance, asking their eligible members to participate. A total of eleven players responded to these calls by completing a preliminary screening survey. Of these respondents, six players were recruited to participate in the study.

The selected participants were interviewed to gather information about their personal, individual experiences with *Final Fantasy XIV*’s avatar creation tool. The questions guiding this interview were as follows:

1. General character information:
 - a. How many characters do you have?
 - b. Do you consider yourself to have a “main?”
2. Character appearance:
 - a. Who does your main character resemble?
 - b. What specific aesthetic choices did you make while creating your character?
 - c. Why did you make those choices?
3. Character fiction:
 - a. How would you describe your relationship with that character?
 - b. Have you ever written any fiction about your character?
 - c. Are you in any roleplaying communities with that character?
4. *FFXIV* customization systems:
 - a. Have you ever used a Phial of Fantasia?
 - b. If Phials of Fantasia were free, would you use them more often? Why?
 - c. When you use Phials of Fantasia, what aspects of your character do you typically change?
 - d. Do you use the glamour system? If so, how frequently do you use the glamour system?

- e. Why do you use the glamour system?
5. *FFXIV's* avatar creation tool:
- a. With *Final Fantasy XIV's* current avatar creation tool do you feel limited in any way?
 - b. In what ways do you feel or do not feel limited?
 - c. What features of the current system do you like?
 - d. How do you feel about the options for gender in *Final Fantasy*?
 - e. If you could change them, how would you?

I analyzed the transcripts collected from these interviews were and categorized based on the question asked and the content of their answer. Essentially responses to the provided questions were grouped based on similarity. If the majority of participants (more than three) provided a similar response, I deemed it a significant finding. This data was used to heavily inform the design of the initial paper prototype. After this, six individual prototype testing sessions were conducted remotely. Each session was held with one previously interviewed participant and at its completion they were asked to fill out a survey. The combination of their real-time reaction and survey data was used to make modifications to the prototype between testing sessions. The feedback survey asked direct questions about the participant's satisfaction with various aspects of the prototype – I took these responses into consideration when refining the paper prototype. After all testing sessions were completed, the combined findings from all parts of the study were condensed into concrete recommendations for inclusive character creation tool design.

Screening Survey & Participant Demographics

My purpose in using a screening survey was to gather some cursory demographic information about potential participants and use open response questions to determine who might be more inclined to give self-reflective and insightful answers. There were eleven respondents in total, however, six of these respondents were selected to move forward in the study. Respondents

who self-identified as transgender or provided an insightful response to the open-ended question “How would you describe your relationship with your main character?” were given preference for selection. Insightful responses were characterized as being reflective on the connection between the player’s identity and the character’s identity. Insightful responses did not have to mention gender to be considered for participation in the study. The target number of participants for this study was between five and eight due to the repeated inclusion of testers in the design process. Six respondents out of the eleven just happened to meet the requirements. Demographic information and data discussed here is limited to the six respondents that were selected to participate in the rest of the study. When talking about specific participants they will be referred to by a number which represents the order that they were individually contacted in. This number is used to protect the identities of the participants.

The age range of the participants was 18 to 36 years of age. Two participants in the age range of 18 to 24 and four participants in the age range of 25 to 36. One participant self-identified as a man, three participants self-identified as women and two participants self-identified as nonbinary. Of these six participants four self-identified as transgender and two did not. The ethnicities of the participants were distributed across White, Hispanic, Asian, and Arab with the majority of participants identifying White to be at least one of their ethnicities.

The play habits of these participants varied greatly. The number of characters played by each participant ranged from one to five. Every participant reported playing Final Fantasy continuously for at least one year, with the longest amount of time played by a single participant being three years. Three participants reported playing the game every day while one reported playing the game 1-2 months out of the year. Two other participants reported playing the game one to two times a week across 6-8 hours.

Q9 - Do you feel that Final Fantasy XIV's avatar creation tool allowed you to make a character that you can identify with? Please rate your answer on a scale from one to six (1 = not at all, 6 = very much so).

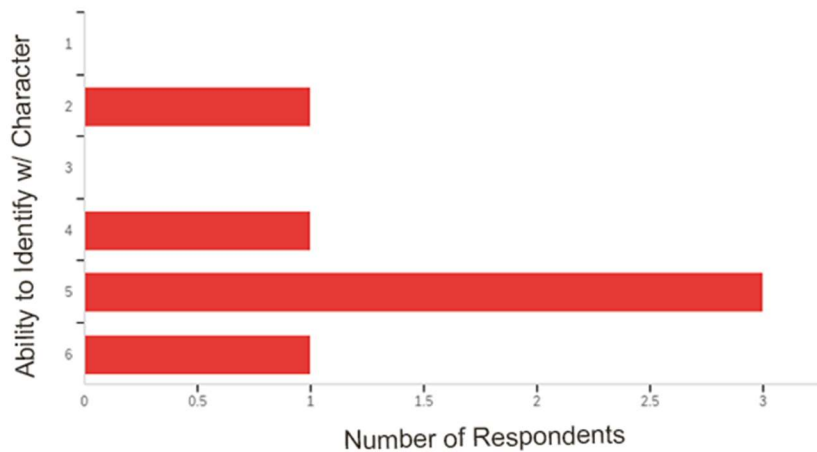


Figure 3: Screening survey, question nine

The attitude of the participants towards the character creation tool itself was largely positive, on average players rated 4.5 ability to create a character to identify with on a scale of one to six. The lowest rating a participant gave was two while the highest rating a participant gave was six (figure 3). When asked to describe their relationship with their main character, each participant provided a unique and thoughtful response. For example, one participant stated, “I don’t really associate him that much with me since I role-play all my characters. However, he does take some traits from me and some masculine physical features I wish I could have.” Another participant explained, “My main character is pretty gender fluid and race fluid xD I’m a fantasia addict. I mainly play females and sometimes males.”

All six respondents who were selected to move on from the screening survey participated in a preliminary, semi-structured interview. The purpose of this interview was to better understand how these players utilized FFXIV’s avatar creation tool and the various ways that they engaged with the game itself. These interviews were so rich with data, the next few sections unpack various important themes that I discovered across the participant’s responses.

Player's Connection to Their Main Character

When thinking about how to model gender in a creation tool for queer players, I determined it necessary to learn about how they perceived their virtual character in relation to themselves. I discovered that no participant attempted to physically model their character completely after their own appearance. Instead, I found that most participants used their avatars to create idealized versions of themselves. Participant #3 explained, "I sort of view her as like, I guess a fantasized version of myself." Participant #4 remarked, "You sympathize with the character because it's you but it's you in the game so it's an idealized version of you." This makes sense considering the fantasy setting and that many of the available races are humanoid but not human – based on human-animal cross breeds. Participant #2 even used their avatar as a means of compensation for insecurities in the real world. They said, "Like, I'm pretty short. I'm only like 5'3". So, when I saw that I could make a male character that was towering over everybody else it gives me a good feeling." This echoes Sherry Turkle's (1994) work in that the unique affordances of a computer space, in this case *Final Fantasy XIV*, has given this participant a direct means of control over an aspect of their identity.

However, it was still apparent that parts of these participants inevitably bled into their character's appearance or personality. Participant #5 described changing their character's skin tone to be darker and more reflective of their "Arab heritage." Even Participant #1 who at the beginning of their interview stated, "... my character is pretty separate from me. Not even in a way of like – it is not even a dream version of myself or an idealistic version of myself." Later admitted, "... I've ended up shifting and thinking of her as being nonbinary in gender like myself. So, that's one thing I ended up projecting on her which is simply my relationship with gender." It's clear that these virtual avatars were deeply personal. Taylor (2002) describes players making choices about their avatars that would best facilitate a player's engagement with

the game world. These choices are inextricably linked to a player's identity to make that personal connection with the content. Thus, it becomes obvious to me that a set of more inclusive character customization options is crucial for queer players to experience the game's content as designed.

Interestingly, three transgender participants actively tried to make transgender characters within the limitations of *Final Fantasy XIV's* system. This meant that either players made avatars with biological sexes that did not match their headcannoned gender identity or they simply headcannoned that their avatar was transgender. "Headcannon" is a term used often by those who write fanfiction to refer to facts about fictional characters that are not "cannon," or official, to the main work. There would be no way for other players within the game or the system itself to know the gender identity of these characters. Participant #2 explained, "I have a transgender male character and that kind of really bothers me when I can't make a flat-chested character. I don't think you can even make a flat-chested character without modding your game." This participant attempted to create a transgender man character by picking the game's "female" sex marker and making aesthetically masculine choices in the creator. They also mentioned, "... Sometimes whenever I find a shirt that I want to wear on my character... I kind of head cannon that he has a total flat chest, but the shirt is just boobs in your face in a very not elegant way." They did this even though the dialogue systems in the game would repeatedly misgender the character and it complicated dressing their character in various clothing. Again, a participant is demonstrating a limitation of the system, the inability to create an explicitly transgender character, with their subversive behavior.

Importance of Community and Socializing

The most important piece of *Final Fantasy XIV*, being an MMO, is the social aspect. This adds a layer of complexity to avatar creation because players know that this avatar will be seen by other players and will act as their conduit for interaction. Participant #4 expressed, "... in Final Fantasy, I love being in groups, because you know. I'll still be a little shy until I'm comfortable but I'm really more outgoing and talkative in the game than I am in real life because it's – I was going to say it's a separate persona..." This builds off what I established in the previous section. Perhaps the confidence gained by being able to construct an ideal self as well as the anonymity of the internet allows these queer players to be more comfortably social. However, none of these avatars can be identified as visually identified as queer because of the limitations of the system. This could mean that finding a community of like-minded queer players could be difficult.

Finding a community with similar identities and values is vital for marginalized people to feel that their experiences are validated. Participant #1 confided that their free company became, "... a space, within the game, within the context of the game where I can express my queerness." This is crucial because often the expression of queerness in the real world is met with violence and discrimination. At the very least, in virtual spaces it is assured that you will endure no physical harm simply for being queer. The normalization of these identities can only happen with their repeated, consistent inclusion in overarching systems. Including diverse options for gender in the character tool would not only allow queer players to further express themselves but also expose gender conforming, cisgender players to queer ideologies.

Gender Expression Outside of the Character Creator

The glamour system is essentially the master controller for what outfits players swap between as they explore the universe of Eorzea. All six participants discussed using the glamour

system extensively. This indicates that it is an important feature of the game. usually, participants reported using this system to overwrite armor appearances that they did not personally like. Participant #3 said, “I usually use it [the glamour system] because for specific points, all of the gear you get is quite uniform and nothing stands out so when you’re in those pits between levels.” Participant #2 leveraged the glamour system to match their character’s appearance to the environment, “Say if my character’s in like Ishgard and it’s freezing, I’m not going to have him be shirtless. But anywhere else I’ll just – most of the time I just swap on a whim. But, occasionally I’ll just have this feeling like, ‘I’m feeling this outfit for today.’” Participant #6 even made a game out of changing their character’s appearance with the glamour system, “... usually whenever I go into dungeons with friends – we’ll do the roulette or whatever to get some extra experience and usually I make it a point to pop back into town and change outfits before we go into another dungeon just to see if whatever I pick matches up with the dungeon we’re going to. Usually it doesn’t but it’s fun when it does.” This is especially intriguing because a system intended for artificial use has been morphed into a form of play by some queer players.

However, not all aspects of clothing in final fantasy are as well received by its player base. Many interview participants talked about annoyance of “gender-locked” outfits. This means that a specific outfit can only be worn by male avatars or female avatars. Usually this is because the outfit is overly feminine, such as a dress, or hyper masculine, such as a pair of swimming trunks with no top. Participant #6 said, “I feel like locking things down to gender is just frustrating and kind of old fashioned.” Similarly, Participant #5 said they found gender-locking “... annoying and to quote a friend of mine... Cowardly.” The outrage here is deserve

because the game, by mandating certain outfits for certain genders perpetuates heteronormativity, which, excludes queer people.

Final Fantasy XIV's Character Creation Tool

Although in the screening survey, on average, the selected participants indicated that Final Fantasy XIV's creation tool allowed them to create a personally identifiable character, they still expressed their discontent with it. Hearing their problems is what helped me identify areas of the tool to change or expand in my prototype. When asked about the system's limitations, all participants listed at least one specific flaw. Participant #1 mentioned, "It's limiting in a way that is very common to a lot of games. So, it asks you to choose male, choose female both decides what physical options you have and your pronouns and how they're referred to with titles and everything. Especially in Final Fantasy I noticed that there's a lot of characters that call you ma'am or some other gendered title like that." Immediately, I recognized that many other participants were talking about the game's assumption of a character's pronouns based on their biological sex. This seemingly minute decision on the developers part essentially erases the existence of transgender identities from their game world. Participant #2 noted different shortcomings, for example, "... everybody's just limited to one body. The only things you can kind of change are just breast size, height, and tail size." The same participant also remarked, "I wish every race had a muscle definition slider. But only humans have it." The observation that everyone was limited to one body was a powerful one. *Final Fantasy XIV's* lack of customization options reinforces that "ideal" bodies are the only ones that exist in this world.

I thought it would be interesting to ask players about their Phial of Fantasia usage history since it may indicate features of the avatar creations tool that were unsatisfactory. All participants except for one had reported using Fantasia at least one time for varied reasons.

Participant #2 said, “I recently just did a Fantasia on them to edit minor features, like, I changed her voice because in combat it was very annoying. So, there’s that and I bumped her height up a bit.” A few other participants reported only using Fantasia for minor changes, not wanted to deviate from their established too dramatically. My hypothesis is that this is because players are personally attached to their avatars. To make this avatar unrecognizable would effectively erase the bond that they have formed. Participant #6 explained using Fantasia for a more experimental reason, “So, it was right after the latest expansion pack came out... They introduced the Viera. Basically giant bunny people. In real life I’m tall and I was like, ‘Hey, I can make my character tall, too! And have fun bunny ears!’ I did that but I had gotten so used to the way my character originally looked and felt I was... I don’t know. Not cheating on, you know, the character or anything but it was strange so I brought her back to her original looks with a fun new haircut.” Participant #4 explained their motivation behind the repeated usage when asked if it stemmed from visual boredom and stagnation, “Yeah it’s just like ‘Ehh, I might change it. Change it up.’ When I discovered Fantasia I was like ‘Ooooo.’ I was talking to a friend who was like ‘You know you can buy them?’ and I was like [gasp]. Yeah, I haven’t looked back. I think I’ve spent way too much on Fantasia.” Despite varied usage, all participants reported that if Phials of Fantasia were not associated with any real-world cost, they would use them more often. This decision did not seem to be influenced by an unhappiness with the creation tool but by a desire to experiment.

Participants were also asked about features that they liked in the tool. The purpose of this line of questioning was so that the prototype would not alter these features. Half of the participants said that the wide variety of presets for different character elements appealing. Participant #4 stated, “In a way, I like that they’ve got the options they’ve got. There is a big

range of options available to you even though it could probably be more, like, better.” This particular response means that, for the purposes of this participant, the affordances provided are adequate. Other participants identified specific features, for instance, Participant #5 identified, “... I liked the fact that in the creation process it gives you the option to choose these different lighting engines and see what it’s going to look like in a scene at night, a scene in the day.” This relates back to Taylor (2002) in that the player is literally seeing their avatar in the world of the game as they make aesthetic choices in real time. The feedback for whether or not they this character fits their own personality and the game space is instantaneous. Participant #1 mentioned, “I really like that you can make the eyes have different colors and that you can also have two colors for the hair. That’s really cool.” This is a degree of customization more than is typical of other character creation tools within MMORPGs. I suspect that is why this participant was so fond of it. Critically, nothing was mentioned about the way that *Final Fantasy XIV*’s system handles gender.

I closed the interview by asking participants to visualize what an ideal system might look like. These suggestions gave me more insight into the needs of queer players. Five of the six participants expressed that gender presentation should not be linked to declaration and four of the six participants expressed that pronoun selection should be a meaningful part of the character creation process. Participant #2 said, “... one big thing for me is letting you choose your pronouns in the quests.” Participant #3 similarly noted, “I would have it simply just be text, if anything. It doesn’t stop you from using certain armor or using certain cosmetics.” Participant #1 discussed the importance of the system recognizing gender identity and pronouns as two separate and meaningful entities. This was because someone’s pronouns do not necessarily reflect their gender identity. For example, someone who is nonbinary might still use he/him or she/her

pronouns and want the body of their character referred to with gender neutral language. These queer players are directly asking for a method to be able to identify their own characters rather than system do it for them.

Synthesis of Design Specifications

Categorization and analysis of the interview data suggested several things; an avatar’s appearance should not automatically determine their pronouns, pronouns and gender identity are separate entities that may not be indicative of one another and aesthetic restrictions and limitations that are reliant on gender are problematic. Of course, other issues were highlighted by this process, for example, the lack of body type and ability diversity and racial representation. However, due to the scope of this project, I focused solely on the systemic problems which related to gender. Below is a table which illustrates and organizes design specifications identified by interview participants.

Feature	Functionality
Body Type Selection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presented as presets 2. Diverse range (eight, musculature, etc.) 3. Not indicative of pronouns
Pronoun Selection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Separate prompt 2. Inclusive of nonbinary option
Gender Declaration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Separate prompt 2. Inclusive of nonbinary option 3. Mechanically meaningful

Gender Modeling System Design

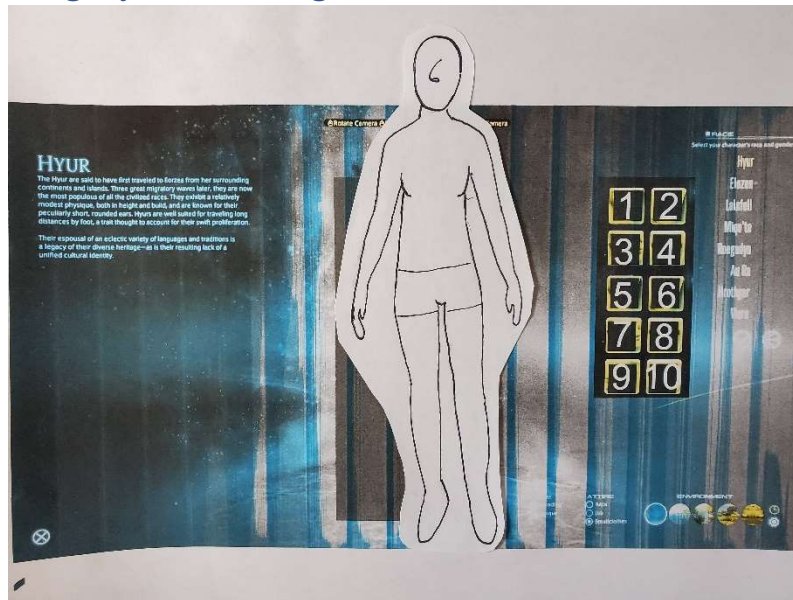


Figure 4: Picture of final paper prototype design

The content of this document up until this point has explained the literature that has informed my understanding, the needs and desires of queer players through the responses of my participants, and the rationale that has informed the design and redesign of the prototype (figure 5). It is important to reiterate that this prototype is meant to make adjustments only to the gender modeling system within *Final Fantasy XIV*. Therefore, this prototype does not contain any of the customization elements from the original tool that do not, in some way, influence the system's understanding of an avatar's gender. The following sections detail the features and affordances granted by this prototype and how users can interact with them.

The prototype is set up by laying the background image on a play surface and laying the pronoun prompt centered on top of the background image. All other loose paper pieces are organized to the side of the play area by step and type. All body types exist in a stack, and other prompts exist in another stack. These other, currently irrelevant pieces are considered to be

outside of the “screen” or considered play space since this is a model based off of a digital environment.

Step One: Pronoun Selection

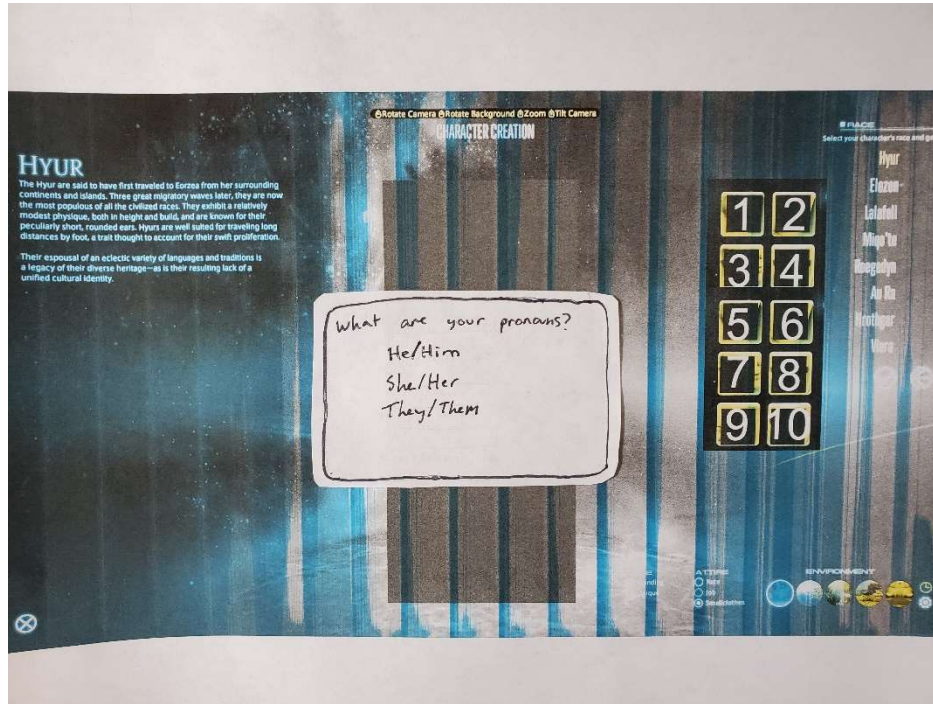


Figure 5: Picture of pronoun selection prompt in final prototype

In this prototype, the first option that a player is met with is the selection of their character’s pronouns (figure 6). This is before any visual or aesthetic options are selected for their character. The pronouns are selected by way of a pop-up prompt, modeled after text prompts seen at many other instances in the game. This prompt contains three separate options a player can set for their avatar’s pronouns; “he/him/his,” “she/her/hers,” and “they/them/theirs.” Players make a selection by either indicating verbally, in the case of remote testing, or physically touching the desired option on the prototype. This prompt is then removed from the play space and stored with the other paper pieces to the side.

Step Two: Gender Identity Selection

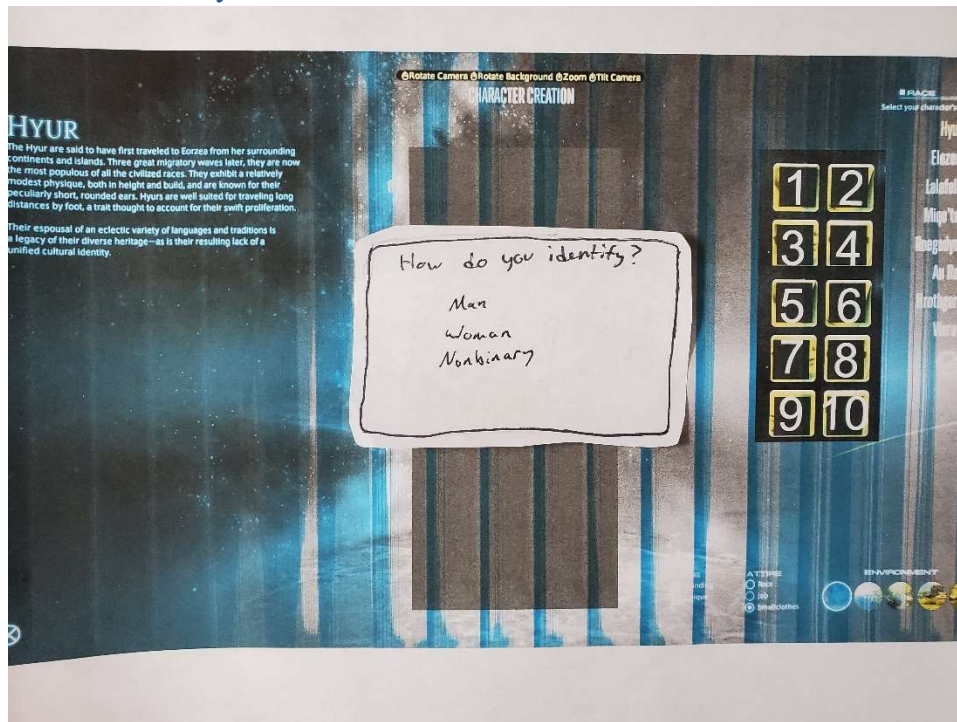


Figure 6: Picture of gender selection prompt in final prototype

Next, the player moves the gender identity prompt into the play space by placing it on the center of the background image. This prompt replicates the same look and feel of the pronoun prompt and also contains three options (figure 7). However, the options on this prompt are “Man,” “Woman,” and “Nonbinary.” The user selects the gender identity for their character in the same manner as with the previous prompt. This prompt is then removed from the play space and stored with the other paper pieces to the side.

Step Three: Body Type Selection

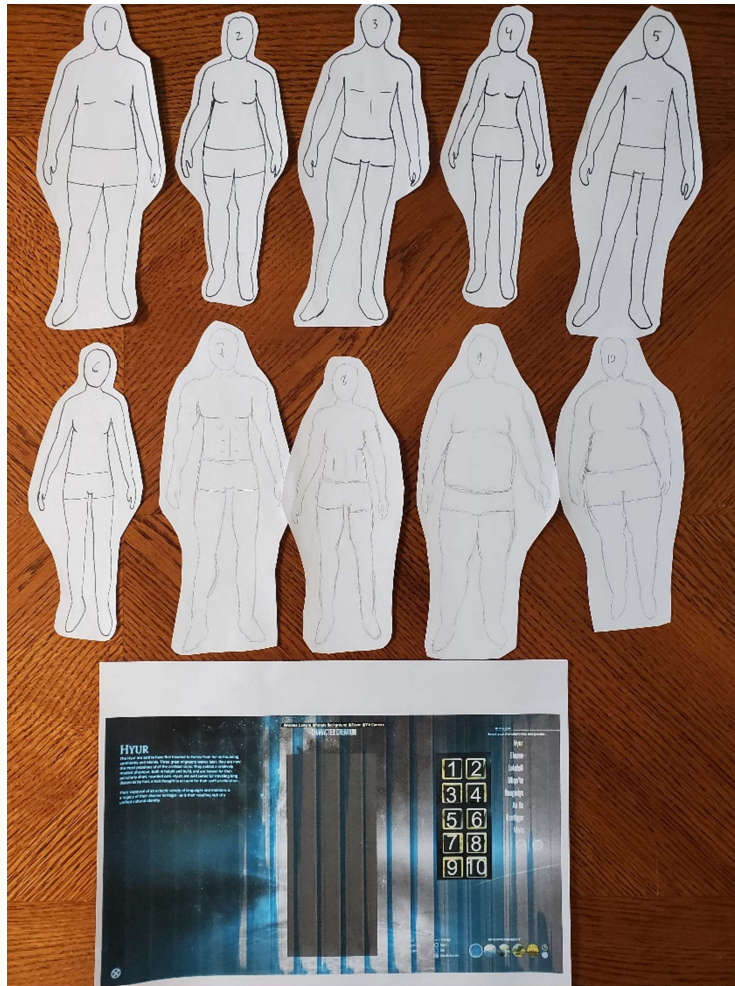


Figure 7: Picture of background image and all available body types

The final element of this prototype is the player's selection of a base body type (figure 8). Users, to properly see all body types, lay them out in a grid above the background image. No "default" body type is placed on the background image. Each body type is numbered to correspond to a button that exists on the background image. Due to the limitations of the prototype itself, all options for body type are for the Hyur race, essentially the closest race to human in this fantasy setting. There are ten different body types for the user to choose from. The user selects their desired body type by either physically touching the corresponding button and placing that body type in the center of the background image or through verbal indication. The

user can change their selection at any time by touching another button and swapping the corresponding body type into the background image. The rest of the character customization elements were left out of the paper prototype because of its focus only on gender selection – not the complexities of gender expression.

Prototype Testing

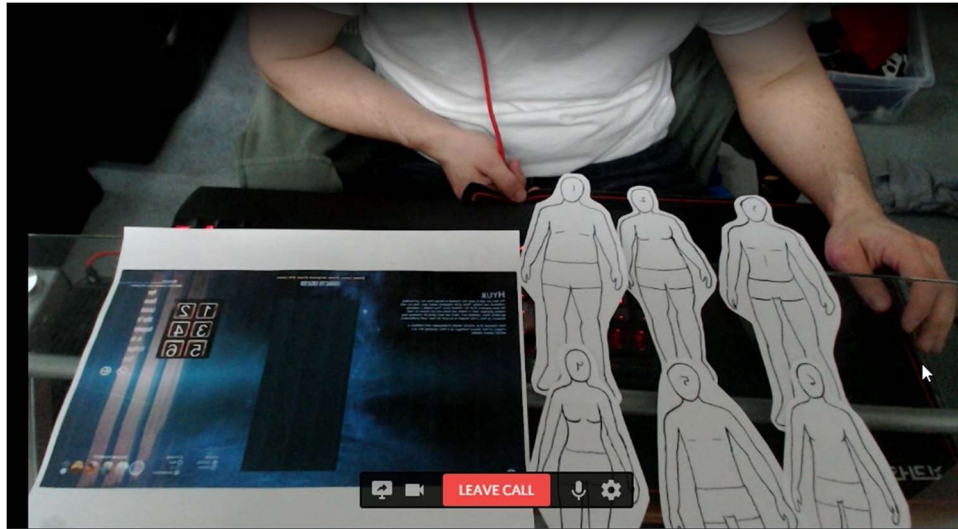


Figure 8: Screen capture of facilitator setting up testing session

Rapid testing of this prototype was done in six separate sessions with one tester per session (figure 9). After each session was completed, micro adjustments were made to the prototype's design to accommodate tester feedback. These six sessions were all completed over the course of one week.

Remote Testing Protocol

Participants for this study lived in several different countries and could not feasibly travel to Worcester Polytechnic Institute to participate in the study in person. Due to the prototype's physical nature, there were certain challenges that had to be overcome when testing it. All testing sessions were conducted either through Google Hangouts or Discord. During these sessions, the testing facilitator would use a webcam pointed down at the desk where the paper prototype was already set up. At no time during these sessions was the participant asked or required to turn on a

webcam for the sake of privacy. The facilitator would then explain how various aspects of the prototype would fit into the digital game itself and then ask the participant to create a character using the provided prototype. The participant would have to indicate to the facilitator which physical pieces to move or select in order to accomplish this task. While the participant was interacting with the tool, the facilitator would ask questions about why the participant was making certain decisions or interacting with the tool in a particular way. These questions were not scripted but instead arose organically. At the end of end session, the participant was asked to fill out a survey about their experience with and thoughts on the prototype. Both the participants responses to questions during testing and the survey results were used to improve the prototype for the next session.

Body Silhouettes and Paper Dolls



Figure 9: Example of a paper doll ([Untitled online image of a retro paper doll])

One of the largest challenges of this project was to figure out how to translate a pre-existing, digital system into a paper prototype which meaningfully modified gender modeling

and gave testers enough familiar context to imagining the changes inside of *Final Fantasy XIV*. In order to do this, I drew inspiration from similar, physical systems of character or avatar creation. Paper dolls are a genre of toy usually marketed towards young girls (figure 10). They consist of a base body in undergarments and an array of clothing and accessories that are designed to fit perfectly over the base. Players can then create different outfits for this two-dimensional doll from the combinations of all the assets available. This toy seemed like it was a good starting point for the development of my paper prototype because it's the closest existing visual representation of avatar creation with premade assets. However, it's worth mentioning that paper dolls differ from virtual avatars because they are divorced from the lore, expectations, and rule sets of a game world. These toys can be played with in any physical location and interact with any other toy that a child may possess. Regardless, I borrowed the concept of a base body and silhouette from paper dolls.



Figure 10: All Final Fantasy XIV races, female (Lady_Vis, 2019)



Figure 11: All Final Fantasy XIV races, male (Lady_Vis, 2019)

In my case, the inclusion of base body types is complicated by the fact that *Final Fantasy XIV*, at the time of writing, has eight playable, humanoid races. The Hyur, Elezen, Lalafell, Miqu’te, Roegadyn, Au Ra, Viera and Hrothgar (figures 11 and 12). In addition to this, each race is associated with two backgrounds, which can influence the customization options available. Including every single race in my prototype would multiply the amount of work needed to modify that prototype by eight. This is especially true due to the fact that the interview participants identified a lack of body type diversity that I wanted to address because bodies are so often rigidly conflated with gender. Another factor to consider is that *Final Fantasy XIV* is a fantasy game. Many of the races, while humanoid, have particular builds according to the lore of the universe and often have features that resemble animals. For example, the Au Ra are lizard humanoids and the Hrothgar are lion humanoids. So, I decided to focus the prototype on just one race, the Hyur which are essentially just humans in the universe of *Final Fantasy XIV*. This race was the easiest to map real world body types and gender to.

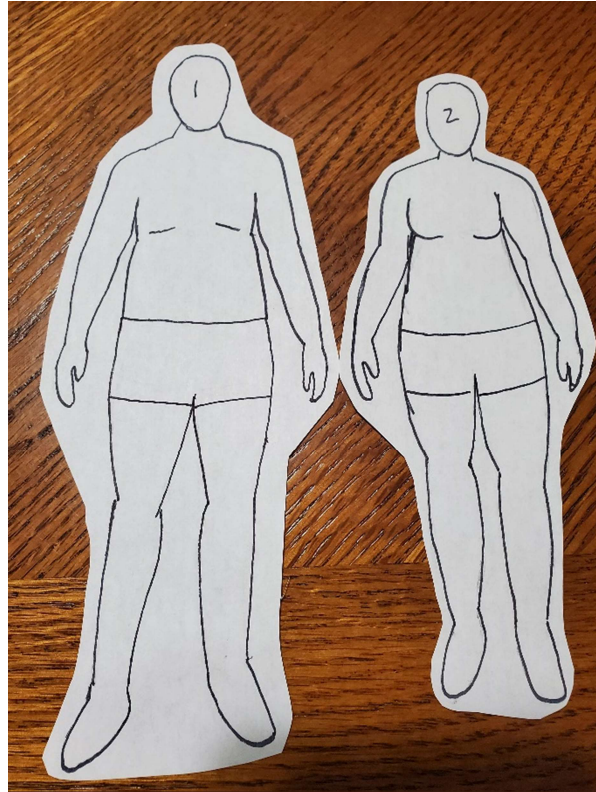


Figure 12: Examples of base body types used in prototype

Another consideration surrounding the development of this prototype and its relationship to paper dolls was the focus was not on accessories and outfits. While the glamour system is an important element of *Final Fantasy XIV*, it's enormous to try and deal with in my prototype. Each body type would require me to remake the same outfit so that it would fit properly. This quickly becomes an astronomical amount of work for the time that I had to test each iteration of the project. I decided that it was more important to focus on giving testers options between body types (figure 13) than to allow them to pick clothing for their avatars to wear. Especially because that isn't an affordance allowed within the avatar creation tool. It's only a feature of the game once a player reaches level fifteen in a non-combat-oriented job.

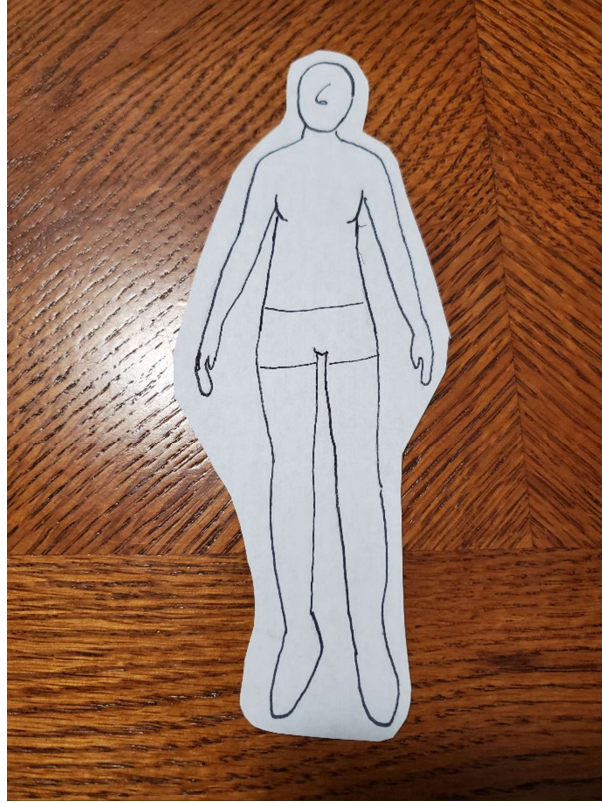


Figure 13: Example of lone body silhouette used in prototype

After deciding that the paper prototype would deal only with one race and be more focused on addressing body type diversity through base silhouettes, I had to determine the level of detail each silhouette would have. In paper dolls, the facial features and undergarments are completely predetermined. In *Final Fantasy XIV's* avatar creation system, individual facial features are customizable from a large selection of presets. However, when a player selects their character's race and gender, a default combination of aesthetic elements is shown within the tool. A default that favors pale skin, and stereotypically masculine or feminine features appears in the tool's spotlight. In the context of this prototype, it was important for me to divorce not only secondary sex characteristics from gender, but also specific facial features and hair styles. So, when crafting the base silhouettes that players could choose from, I made the conscious choice not to include any facial features or hair styles at all. The outline of the silhouette is only

suggestive of secondary sex characteristics, they are not drawn in detail (figure 14). The idea being if these drawings were translated into three-dimensional models in the game engine, they would be entirely featureless. This way, when players are selecting a body type as the base for their character, there are less societal biases influencing their choice. They have the option to play as a male character with breasts or a female character without them if that's their desire. For the sake of simplicity, these initial silhouettes were created by using plain white printer paper to trace the silhouettes of the 3D models already existing in the game engine. These body type traces were used as proportional guidelines when creating additional body types. When creating this preliminary prototype, I was wary of the fact that the silhouettes were drawn on white paper, which may have resembled lighter or paler skin tones. I did not recreate these silhouettes on different colored paper or color them in at all for the sake of simplicity and ease of future iteration. There were six body types in total for the first round of testing.

However, as the rounds of testing progressed, it became clear to me that six body types were not comprehensive enough. One participant indicated in their survey response that, "I think the only improvement I can think of is to do with the range of body types. There could be sliders included to adjust certain things in the body type after you choose it, aka: muscles, breasts, pecs etc."

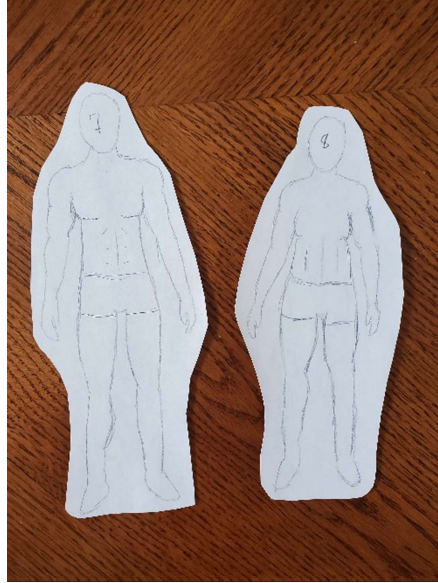


Figure 14: Picture of body types seven and eight

Implementing more body types, called for by the participant was easy to implement. Additionally, it's without a doubt that customizability of body type musculature would increase the aesthetic options for all players; however, it's not a change I made to the prototype. Including a slider option which would gradually increase muscle mass for each body type would increase work exponentially in a physical model. For each body type, of which there were six, a new silhouette would need to be created for each granulation of additional muscle mass. For a project that requires rapid iteration, this amount of work and detail is not feasible. Also, I did not feel that musculature was a necessary component of a gender modeling system. I equated it to the same ideological level of character customization as choosing a hair style or an eye color. So, as a compromise, I added two more selectable body types from the available silhouettes, making those body types more muscular than the other options (figure 15).



Figure 15: Pictures of body types nine and ten

Another participant suggested, “consider adding a couple more body types.” At this juncture I realized that I did not have body types which represented fat or heavy bodies. So, I created two more silhouettes to further diversify the pool of body types (figure 15). It is worth mentioning that still, not represented in these options are disabled bodies. While this project is focused specifically on the modeling of queer bodies and identities, issues surrounding representation of disabled people in video games is also a crucial area of study and growth.

Contextualization of the Prototype

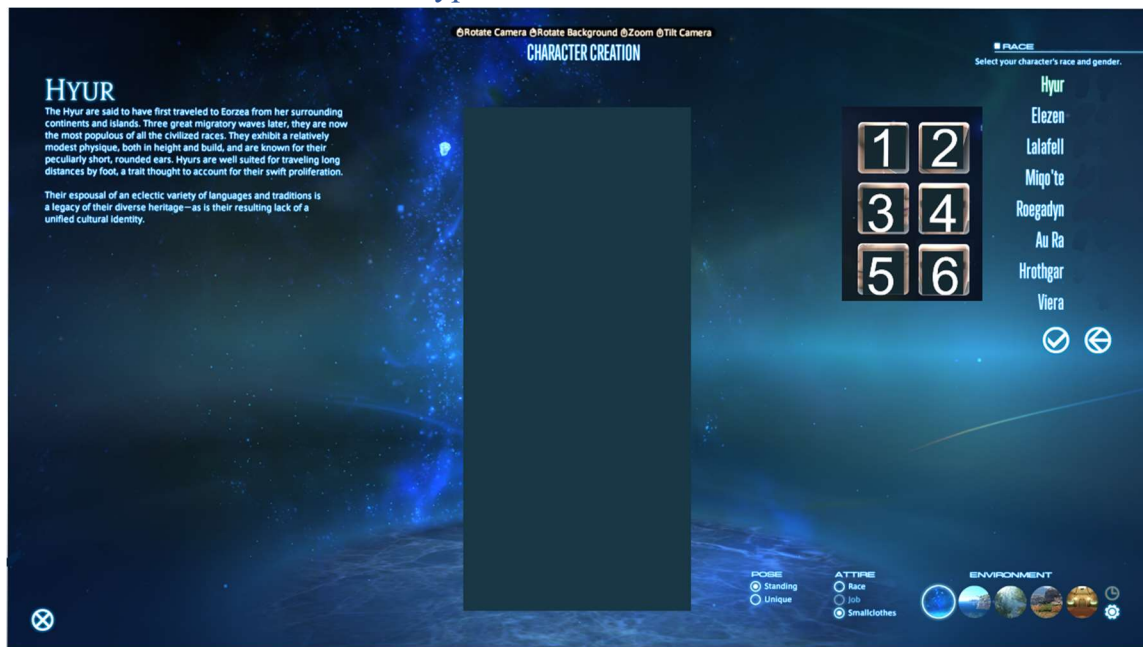


Figure 16: Picture of prototype background image

In order to make the paper prototype feel as if it were truly a part of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s tool, elements directly from the game's character creation environment needed to be included. I took a screen shot of the character creation process at the moment where players select their character's combined race and gender. I then opened the screenshot in Photoshop to remove the elements that I planned on changing, for example, the Greek sex symbols next to each race and the 3D character model in the center of the screen. This image now served as a contextualized backdrop for players to select their character's body type (figure 16).

Only one more element was missing from this scene and that was an interface that allowed players to browse different body types and select one. Other places in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s character creation tool use a grid of thumbnails that have representative images. For example, when players are scrolling through various hair style options, they navigate a grid of thumbnails, clicking on thumbnails with interesting styles to see them appropriately scaled and attached to their character model. Because this system is already familiar to players of this game,

I adopted it for my paper prototype. I placed the selection grid to the left of the race options to stand in for where the Greek sex symbols were placed. In my prototype, the thumbnail grid uses numbers to correspond to body types because in this format, such a small depiction of a full body type would be hard to see by testers. Especially considering the challenges surrounding testing this prototype remotely.

Pronoun Selection and Gender Declaration Systems

According to the interview data it was important to, at the very least, create the ability for players to select their pronouns. While the visual representation and implementation of a pronoun prompt is simple, exactly what options to include are complicated. Just thinking within the bounds of the English language, when referring to individual people, the most commonly utilized pronouns are he/him/his, she/her/hers, and they/them/theirs. Often, video games do not offer a gender neutral pronoun option – typically they assign she/her/hers pronouns to cisgender female bodies and he/him/his pronouns to cisgender male bodies. While choosing to include they/them/theirs pronouns in games is absolutely a step in the right direction, it's important to recognize that not all nonbinary people like or use they/them/theirs. Other gender neutral pronouns used by nonbinary people use are fae/faer/fears, ey/em/eirs, and ze/hir/hirs.

Pronoun Selection

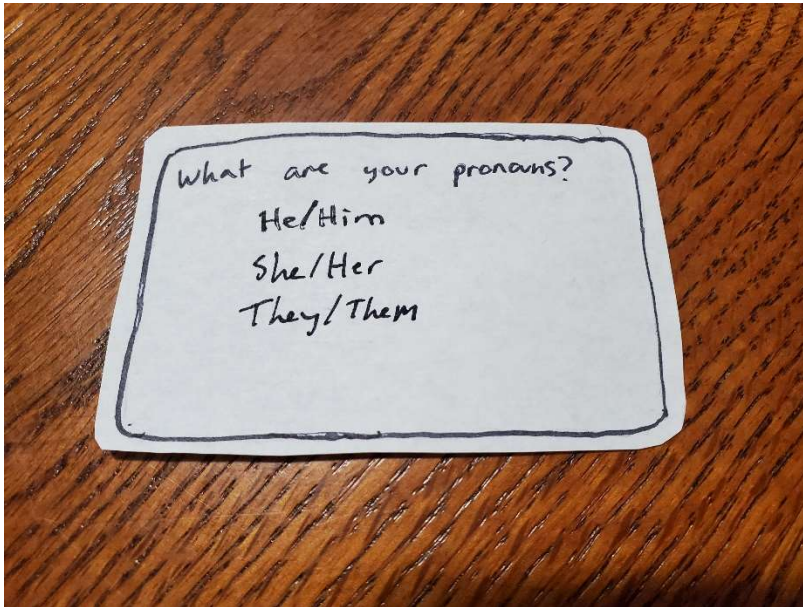


Figure 17: Picture of simplified pronoun selection prompt

A system that would allow players to manually enter their pronouns has both advantages and disadvantages. Due to the practice of asking people for their pronouns, popularized by advocates of the LGBTQIA+ community, when met with an open-ended pronoun prompt, queer players would know how to respond. Players of *Final Fantasy XIV* are not all queer and may be unfamiliar with the necessity to declare or introduce oneself with their pronouns. These players may find an open-ended pronoun prompt confusing. There is also the possibility that the freedom of these prompts will invite players to write harmful or irrelevant text as part of a joke.

Especially if these custom pronouns are displayed to other players within the game. Creating a system that would police player input would be difficult since gender neutral pronouns that people use evolve with time. For these reasons, I chose not to include a completely customizable system in the initial prototype. Instead, I chose to include a prompt in my system which would allow players to select one of three options: she/her/hers, he/him/his, or they/them/theirs (figure

17). This simplified design includes an option for people who identify outside of the gender binary while not allowing non-queer players to abuse the system.

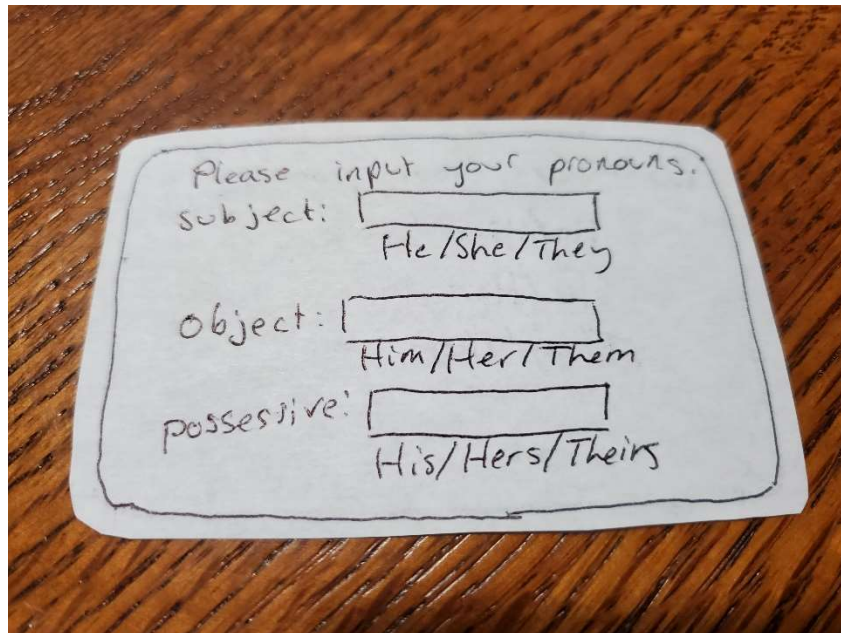


Figure 18: Picture of pronoun input system

However, one participant suggested that “an option to put in your own pronouns” could improve the inclusivity of the prototype. Despite my initial decision against an open-ended pronoun prompt, I decided to make an iteration of the prototype which included one based on this feedback. I wanted to see what other participants thought of a system like this and how this design would affect the participant’s difficulty rating of the prototype. This new pronoun prompt featured three text input fields – one for the subject pronoun, one for the object pronoun, and one for the possessive pronoun. Included on the prompt are examples of what should be input into each field (figure 18). These pronoun entries would be stored in separate variables and saved to the same account data system used by the job quick change menu and toolbar configuration memory. Whenever the player’s character would be referred to in text by a nonplayer character the appropriate form of the pronoun would be pulled from those variables and displayed as text.

This system would be more practically viable if the player's interactions with other characters only occurred through text. However, there are many voice-acted cutscenes where other characters do refer to the player character. Currently, the voice acting in these cutscenes uses either she/her/hers or he/him/his pronouns depending on the player character's sex. It would be unrealistic and expensive for Square Enix to go back and pay the voice talent to re-record all those lines of dialogue with different pronouns. This would entail re-recording over one hundred hours of dialogue. Furthermore, with the wealth of gender neutral pronouns in existence, it would be impossible to anticipate all of the pronouns that may be used. However, because his prototype is meant to explore ideal systems, I thought it was valuable to at least test this design at least once.

I chose to revert the pronoun prompt design because its open-ended design complicated the process. It is possible that the prompt itself could have been refined so that it was easier to understand, but the potential amount of text required to properly teach players what to input seems cumbersome. Additionally, if a queer player from this focus group had difficulty understanding this design, that does not bode well for non-queer players who are not as familiar with recognizing and verbalizing their pronouns.

Gender Declaration

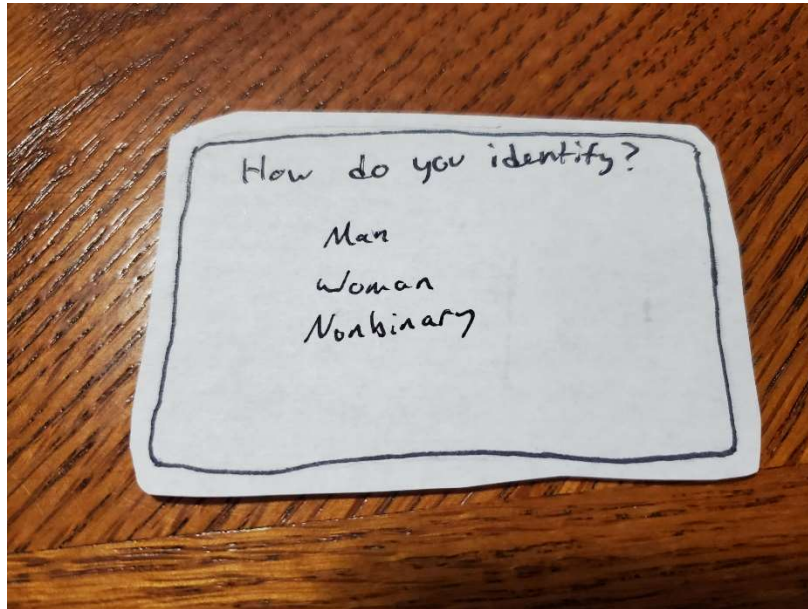


Figure 19: Picture of simplified gender identification prompt

One participant during the interview process had stressed that pronouns and gender identity, while related, are not necessarily indicative of each other. For example, someone who identifies as agender, an identity outside of the binary, could still use she/her/hers pronouns. This individual may not want typically feminine words such as “pretty” to be used in reference to their avatar’s body. For a game system to assume that a character would want to be referred to with these feminine words simply because they use she/her/hers pronouns would be frustrating. There are also many gender-based restrictions and limitations in the game. If those were to persist with the modifications to the character creation tool, assuming a character was a woman based on using she/her/hers pronouns would not be accurate. Because of this insight, I also decided to include another prompt, which allowed players to select their character’s gender identity. This prompt is separate from both the character’s physical appearance and their pronouns. On this prompt, the available options for gender are simply “man,” “woman,” and “nonbinary” (figure 19). This simplification shares the same issues as pronoun simplification.

People who identify outside of the gender binary who don't group their identities under the nonbinary umbrella also exist. However, this system at least offers an option that recognizes and resists a gender binary while remaining simple and easily implementable. I chose to place both pronoun and gender identity prompts at the very end of the character creation process. This way, a character's appearance is not directly shaped by the player's biases associated with gender declaration.

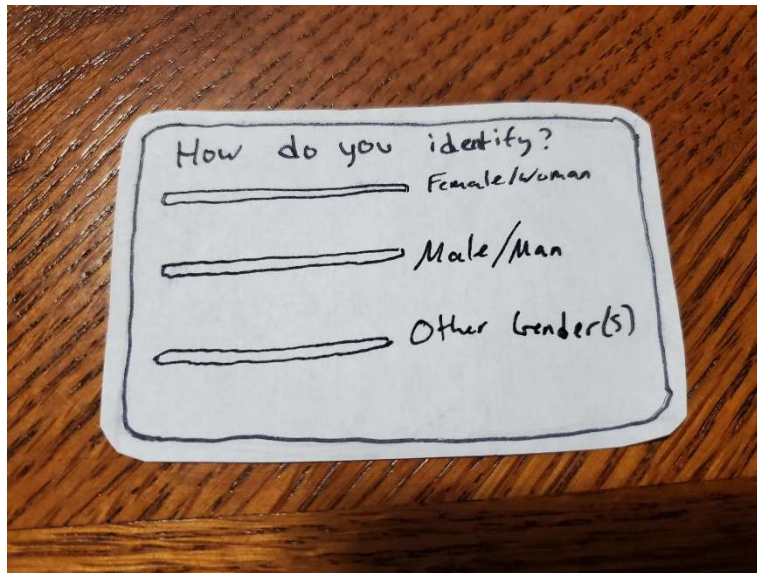


Figure 20: Slider-based gender identity prompt

After several rounds of testing, it was apparent that the simplified gender identity prompt is clear and easy to use by this group of queer *Final Fantasy XIV* players. However, it still suffers from not necessarily being inclusive of all identities outside of the gender binary. I wanted to test a more complicated declaration system which would be able to more accurately represent a wider range of identities.

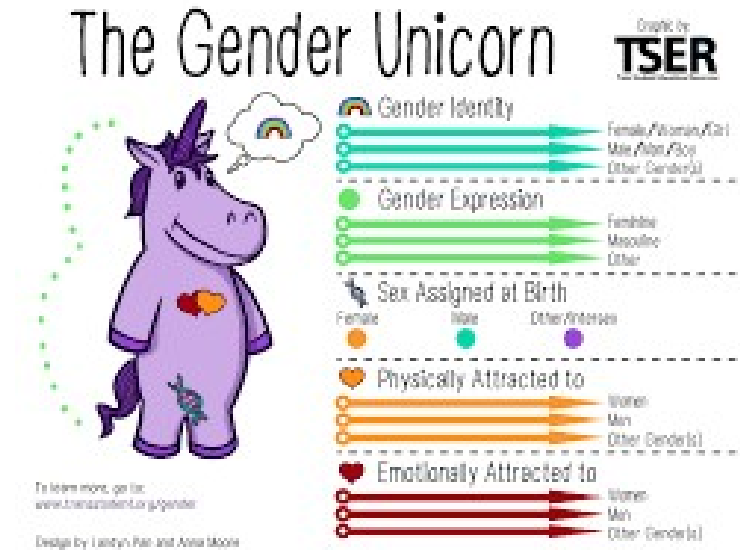


Figure 21: Gender unicorn infographic (Pan & Moore)

This new system was modeled after the popular, educational infographic “The Gender Unicorn” created by the nonprofit group TSER (Trans Student Educational Resources) (figure 21). It visually illustrates that gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, physical attraction, and emotional attraction different, unrelated. It also emphasizes that many identities within these categories are composed of the combination of three axes values – each axis corresponding to femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. This beautifully represents the complexity and fluidity of the queer community and challenges heteronormative beliefs about sexual and gender identity. In the gender identity prompt for this prototype I borrowed heavily from the Gender Unicorn’s concept of multi-axis representation. In my prompt one axis represents male, one axis represents female, and one axis represents nonbinary (figure 20). There are no restrictions or interdependent relationships with regards to how the sliders operate. For example, a completely valid player input to this prompt would be to maximize all values. I was curious to see how the participant would respond to this new system in the next session.

When testing this new design, a participant offered, “as long as a character can be properly recognized as non-binary in practice, then it’s pretty good for my individual needs.” This comment brought up a crucial concern. With this new system of modeling gender which has slider values that would presumably go up to one hundred, what slider input values would be recognized by the system as nonbinary? How would the system categorize a situation where all three values were one hundred? What if all three values were zero? I didn’t have the answers to these questions. The fact is that these slider values would have to be interpreted, simplified, and categorized by the system in some way. The means that this prompt only presents the player with the façade of a near limitless number of gender declaration options. Due to the concerns about how truly meaningful the gender identity slider system was, I chose to revert back to the old, tested, three option design. I wanted a system that balanced accessibility of the entire *Final Fantasy XIV* player base with its ability to represent a wide range of queer identities. This slider system was complicated to interpret by both the player and, speculatively, by the program itself. Therefore, it was not an optimal solution.

Activity Ordering

The prompts for both pronoun selection and gender declaration intentionally appeared after the user selected a body type in the initial prototype. This was so that the physical appearance of the avatar was not influenced by the user’s definition of their identity. It could be something that the user discovered through experimentation and play within the avatar creation tool.



Figure 22: Illustration of new prompt order

However, one participant suggested, “I think the order and time the pronoun and or gender identity are picked should be relocated to much earlier in the process.” Moving the timing of pronoun and gender selection was trivial because they were designed as separately. I just changed the order that the different prompts and screens appeared (figure 22). In the following version of the prototype, first, testers are asked to select their pronoun, then their gender identity, and then move forward to the physical aspects of character creation.

Conclusion

The results of this study are crucial simply because they are obtained from a marginalized voice within the gaming community. The playtesting data and prototype revisions clearly imply a set of best practices and suggestions regarding the inclusivity of avatar creation systems with respect to gender. In addition to this, the initial survey data in combination with the interview transcript highlights an interesting dissonance about the awareness of queer people of their own needs.

Although this prototype was designed to modify Final Fantasy XIV's pre-existing character creation system, the discovered design suggestions are applicable to any system. When interviewed, almost every participant identified that they wished the system allowed them to select their characters pronouns rather than the system automatically determining the character's pronouns based on sex. Based on the testing of the prototype with this group of queer players, the inclusion of one set of gender-neutral pronouns is sufficient. Participants also reacted positively to the inclusion of a separate gender identity selection prompt. This prompt is particularly useful for the proper portrayal of some nonbinary identities. Again, a simple inclusion of a "nonbinary" option was viewed positively. Lastly, the resistance against normative ideas of what a "male" or "female" body should look like is imperative to reflect in these tools. This can be achieved and appreciated by queer players by simply separating any physical or aesthetics-based choices from the character's pronouns or gender. In summation, three key features vastly improve the affordances of these tools for queer players; 1) the inclusion of pronoun identification, 2) the identification of gender identity, and 3) the separation of both of these options from the character's physical appearance. This is not to say that this is an exhaustive list, but a list developed through the outcomes of this individual study.

According to the initial screening survey sent to these participants, they reported an average ability of 4.5 out of 6 to create a character that they could identify with. This score represents that participants felt that they were reasonably able achieve this with Final Fantasy XIV's current system. However, this rating is incongruous with all of the critical failings of this system in representing gender pointed out by the participants themselves. It's possible that this is due to the fact that queer people can create identifiable characters within the constraints of a heteronormative system. However, this could also be contributed to the fact that queer players are hardly represented in these systems, so they are unaware of the affordances that should be available to them. Ultimately, these tools incidentally define what bodies are possible and acceptable through their combination of customizable features. These tools erase both queer and fat bodies through absence of crucial features. All players of games deserve the ability to imagine themselves in the virtual world that they spend their time in, even if that world is rooted in fantasy. If these games continue to perpetuate these normative then marginalized players will always be required to make a space for themselves rather than feel a sense of belonging.

While these framework suggestions in are a step towards inclusivity and supporting queer players, it is, however, not exhaustive. The outcomes of this project were limited in scope, the number and diversity of its participants, and remote testing. It is possible that another group, larger group of queer players belonging to the community of another game with these tools would yield additional, equally important design suggestions.

It is worth noting that the proposed design solutions do not account for queer players with fluid identities. None of the participants of this study self-identified as having a fluid identity and therefore could not provide any relevant feedback or input. These systems are rigid and usually only allow for physical character creation once. If this sort of character redesign is allowed it is

usually hidden behind a paywall. Only external things such as hairstyle or clothing can typically be changed in late-game play. I think this particular limitation has potential negative implications for queer players with fluid identities and absolutely warrants further exploration.

In addition to the aforementioned shortcomings, the modeling of this system becomes complicated considering that the game does not only feature interaction with NPCs but also with other players. An avatar's gender identity and pronouns are easily enforceable through code and NPC dialogue. However, that begs the question of how to most effectively display a character's pronouns in the game world. Is it featured in a UI pane? Is it displayed as part of the character's name above their character model? Would other players abuse this information and misgender characters? The answers to these questions could help future designers and scholars develop methods to ensure that characters are not misgendered by their peers. There is a wealth of promise in the interrogation of how to encourage correct pronoun usage in the social, virtual setting that characterizes MMORPGs.

Appendix

Pre-Interview Script

Hello! Thank you so much for participating in this study - it's a massive help with my work and research. The purpose of this specific study is threefold; to contribute to the scholarship which critiques the shortcomings in avatar creation tools, to determine what aspects of avatar creation tools are important to queer players of games through assumptions made by this specific study of FFXIV, and to suggest a more inclusive framework for designers to represent gender in MMORPGs. The overall deliverable of this project is to use participatory design practices to create a paper prototype of an avatar creation system meant to be an extension of FFXIV's current system. This prototype is meant to focus on modeling gender, but it will also inevitably deal with other limitations in avatar creation tools such as body type and racial diversity.

This study is segmented into several pieces. The initial interview - which we're doing now - and then three separate sessions for remote playtesting. On the consent form, these separate sessions are listed as being one hour in length, but realistically, they should only take twenty minutes. We are essentially working together to create a system which is more inclusive of non-normative identities.

In this semi-structured interview, I'll be asking you specific questions about your experience with FFXIV and the character that you inhabit in its virtual world. This interview will be audio-only recorded for transcription purposes. Please know that in my Thesis document no personally identifying will be used (for example, your name or your character's name). If at any time for any reason, you do not wish to answer a specific question please say so and we will move on. In addition, if you wish to terminate your participation in this study for any reason, you are free to do so with no questions asked.

If you have not yet read through the consent form, I'm going to ask you to please do so now. If you have any questions regarding anything I've said or the content of the consent form, I'd be happy to answer them. If you could either digitally sign this form through Adobe reader or sign it manually and scan it or take a picture to send back to me, what would be fantastic.

Before we start with the content of the interview, I'd just like to make a positionality statement and tell you a little bit about the nature of my work. I'm a game studies scholar and transgender man whose research explore transmasculine identities in video games and gaming culture. I'm also a designer who makes small games which are really just journal entries about my own queer experiences. My motivation with this project is to redefine systems that establish what ideal bodies are with their possibility spaces. Okay. Now that you know a little bit more about me - let's start.

Participant #1 Interview

Interviewer: How many characters do you have?

Participant: Just one.

Interviewer: Why did you stick with just one?

Participant: It's interesting to think about because in other games, my main character would shift over time, sometimes. Like, every six months or so or more. Sometimes I would switch from one character to another. Um, but in Final Fantasy, I actually stuck to this one character. Both for gameplay because in Final Fantasy you can do everything with one character. But also kind of the roleplay I do in my head about my character's story. Which I've also written a little bit. I've really stuck to this one character. I'm not - I'm trying to reason why further.. But... in SWTOR I would often come up with a story for my character that was kind of based on the class I was playing. But for Final Fantasy I have come up with alternate stories for my character for certain classes. There are like three classes I see as being cannon to what my character is doing in the story. Even if gameplay-wise I am playing everything. I did come with alternate stories for certain classes that I don't see as being cannon to the character. But I have not actually created an alternate character gameplay-wise to actually play to that alternate story. It just exists in my head.

Interviewer: So, you said that you wrote your main character, is that something that you post online? Or is it just something that's personal?

Participant: Yes, it used to be just in my head. Then there was this event on Tumblr called "FFXIV Write (so this time it was) 2019." So, I saw this on Twitter. I was like "Hey, I could do that! I like writing challenges like that" because you have a theme every day and you have to write something. There is no word count or anything but you have to write something on that theme everyday for a month. And I did it. Sometimes I wrote something very long, on certain days it was a little hard. But I really fleshed out a lot of ideas that just existed in my head. I also came up with a lot of new ones. That's basically the only time that I really wrote about my ideas.

Interviewer: Does your main character resemble anyone? Or just like a vision in your head? What was your process for creating the aesthetic of that character?

Participant: That's an interesting question. So, first of all I was like - in Final Fantasy you can be a cat girl - so I was like, obviously I'm going to be a cat girl. Why wouldn't I? They have a lot of cool options in there. Sometimes it's tempting to try a different race in the game. I'm just really attached to the cat girl, I think. So that was the first decision. After that - so, my character went through two appearances. First, she was just a general idea. She was kind of a tomboy with black hair and that was the general idea. Later - so, I was making a retainer which uses the same system where you make your own NPC basically the same character creator and I came up with a design. I was like, "wait a minute this design is way cuter than the one I'm using for my character. So, what I ended up doing - I saved it, which is a very useful feature that I wish every character creator had where you can save the character you created. I saved it, then I applied it to my actual character. The redesign was really different in one particular way. Which is, I am a white person, in this design I actually used the darkest realistic skin color available to Keepers Miquote. Uh, and the reason I did that is not exactly an aesthetical reason. So, Keepers of the Moon have different skin colors from Seekers of the Sun. The particularity of the Keepers one is that they're all kind of cold in terms of color. Except for one. Only the darkest realistic skin tone has kind of a warm almost red tint to it. Especially when you have a lot of light to it. Like, on your character it's more obvious. And I wanted a skin tone with a warm tint. And so I went with

that one even if it wasn't representative of me. At the time I was completely - I didn't even think about that because my character's pretty separate from me. Not even in a way of like - it is not even a dream version of myself or an idealistic version of myself. They are just kind of their own hero, their own thing with their own story. But later, especially as I ended up writing about my character and stuff, I ended up projecting a little bit on her. There I ended up questioning a little bit. Like, is it blackface if I project on this character who is black and I am white? I ended up wondering about that. But, at the same time I was like, I can't change my skin tone because then it's white-washing because I have a set story for this character. Like, she is black, this is part of her story. I can't just change it that would probably be even worse. I still see her as being pretty her own thing, she is separate from me, she is not really a dream version of myself even if I might project a little bit on things like gender. But that's it. That was kind of the process of designing her physically.

Interviewer: Awesome.

Participant: I hope that's a good answer to the question.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's a perfect answer. So, this question was also on the survey and you also have kind of addressed it what you just said. But I'll ask it more directly again with hopes that you could expand on what was in your survey responses. What is your relationship with this character that you play?

Participant: So, yeah, the one thing I can go further into is the one thing I ended up projecting. She is so - as a character, she is very different from me. She is not a dream version of myself in terms of personality, appearance, anything. Except for one thing I didn't mention. At the beginning, I was thinking of her as a trans woman. But, I've ended up shifting and thinking of her as being nonbinary in gender like myself. So, that's one thing I ended up projecting on her which is simply my relationship with gender. I see her now as a trans feminine agender person. I think that's basically what I can add to that question.

Interviewer: Have you ever used a Phial of Phantasia? Why? Or how frequently do you use them?

Participant: So, it's very rare. I basically did it once. I think technically more to address some small details. But basically, so the one time I made that retainer design and was like "I'm going to use that myself" so I used a Phial of Fantasia. But other than that, no I don't. It's pretty rare for me to use one.

Interviewer: If they were free do you think you would use them more often?

Participant: Maybe. Actually one thing I'm planning for April Fool's, I'm planning to change for just one day into a Lalafel to surprise my friends in the game. Just for a joke. It's going to cost me like, I don't know, like \$20 just for a joke.

Interviewer: [laughing] It's a pretty good joke.

Participant: If it were free, that would be nice because it's just for a joke. But yeah, I think I would do only small adjustments in general. Especially, - like, sometimes people, they dramatically change their character with Phantasia. I kind of avoid doing that. I did it once but it was kind of a retcon like my character always looked like that in my head even if it wasn't technically the case. No, it's like she has a set appearance and that's a cannon appearance because she has this whole story in my head and in writing. It's set. It's a story, it's not going to change. She's not going to be a bunny the next day, certainly, and nobody's going to question it.

Interviewer: Do you use the glamour system? How frequently do you use the glamour system if you do?

Participant: Yes, I use it a lot. Actually, I'm constantly running out of plates. I wish - like many people - I wish it had more plates. Yeah, I make new glamour pretty often. Especially with Shadowbringers. Actually before the end - so I joined the game a little under two years ago. It was like the beginning of Stormblood. It took me awhile to catch up and everything. So, Heavensward, for each - I had a really specific glamour for Heavensward and Stormblood each. I found an outfit that I like and it was like "Okay, that's it. That's the outfit I'm using for my character as I go through the main story as I'm catching up." But then with Shadowbringers I still haven't quite - going through the expansion itself I had one outfit that I actually immediately liked and I was like, "Okay, that's my character's outfit." It was an outfit that went well with the Crystarium. So it was like "oh, this is an outfit that she got in the Crystarium for the exarch or something" and that's what she wore for the whole expansion. But now in the post expansion itself, I've been making a lot of glamour and not being 100% sold on any one outfit. Especially since I've been testing - now that I've caught up on the story, I barely caught up in time for Shadowbringers and now I can just explore things there's different jobs and everything. Going through most of the story I played bard and then I played dancer for Shadowbringers. So, I was really into all the glammers which were the same category. Now I'm playing red mage so I've actually been making a lot of new glamour because it's a whole new category. It's a different aesthetic. Anyway, yeah, I'm making a lot of glamour to answer the question simply.

Interviewer: That's good. Long answers are great. So, when you use the system it's like, "Ah, this is the outfit that's canon in my head for a particular chunk of the game?"

Participant: Yeah, pretty much, yeah. I will come up with the glamour and it's like, "this is what my character is actually wearing as part of the story."

Interviewer: So, with Final Fantasy XIV's avatar creation tool do you feel limited in any way? Do you wish that there were features that existed that don't exist?

Participant: The one thing I really want is to make my cat girl taller. Because cat girls are small and I really wish I could make her taller. I do find the size of a character, the size available, the range - it's nice that it's an option in the first place, but it's a bit limited. Especially for the smaller ones like the Miquote and the Au'ra, it's pretty limited for them. It's a difference of like ten, fifteen centimeters for the whole range. I've been wondering why they didn't make it more free because all the game does is make your character model bigger. On one side, it's easy at the same time I wonder if they're not worried that if you start to make the character model very big

it would start to look weird because it's not realistically taller. It's that the whole model is bigger. I don't know if it would necessarily look great if you just make it super big. I think it's mostly lore reasons that they sometimes restrict it a little bit. So, anyway, that's the one thing I wished - especially realistic things we could have, I wish we had for the character creator. It's just more range for the size of the character.

Interviewer: When you created your character, did you go in to modify the specific elements? Like, I know for facial options, you can modify like jaw height or something, or where the eye brows sit on the face. Or did you use mostly presets?

Participant: Yeah, It's mostly presets anyways. Like the character doesn't really - gives really little options for modifying the face. I think the only notable things I did because choosing the preset face was just making her cheeks a little larger, a little puffier. I think that's the only thing. You can change the nose or something but nobody even notices. Like, it's too small and there's too few options to really make that noticeable otherwise. So the cheeks were the only thing, really.

Interviewer: What are some features that you really like that are in the character creator?

Participant: I really like that you can make the eyes have different colors and that you can also have two colors for the hair. That's really cool. The tail option - that you can have a character with a tail to begin with, I really like that. You have various options for that. I'm trying to think is there anything else that I really like. I think that's kind of it. Going through everything in my head, is there anything that I really like. Not particularly. The general character creator is good but there's nothing that particularly pops in my mind other than the bicolor thing.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the options for modeling gender in the character creator? Do you feel that it's limiting? or you're like, "no, this is fine?"

Participant: Yeah, it's kind of limiting. It's limiting in a way that is very common to a lot of games. So, it asks you to choose male, choose female that both decides what physical options you have and your pronouns and how they're referred to with titles and everything. Especially in Final Fantasy I noticed that there's a lot of characters that call you "ma'am" or some other gendered title like that. So there is limitation. There is also sometimes differences between the two genders. There was a thing with the two new races introduced where they were only available each to one gender. That was pretty controversial before Shadowbringers came out. I understand why it happened this way. The devs have explained it but I still think it was kind of a bad decision at least - it turned out fine. Nobody really cares anymore. People don't really talk about it anymore.

Interviewer: Can you talk through that controversy just really quick?

Participant: Okay, so, Square Enix announced two new races for Shadowbringers. There was the Hrothgar who are big lion men and the Viera who are tall women and they are only available to the specific gender. That was really unexpected. A lot of players - like, they first announced the Viera and a lot of players were like "obviously they're going to announce male Vieras,

right?” People didn’t really believe that we would get gender restrictions like that because even in 1.0 there was already certain races that were specific to certain genders and at the time when they went to A Realm Reborn they changed it because people didn’t like it. So, it was like they wouldn’t make the same mistake again, right? Like that seems weird. So there was this whole surprise of like, “no, they’re actually going with that.” So, the dev explained that they wanted to have a beast race in the game, so they made the Hrothgar. Then they were like, “oh, players really want Viera so we are going to make male Hrothgar and female Viera and that will make the devs happy with a beast race and that will make the players happy because they will have the Viera.” But also the players don’t like gender restrictions, so? I understand why they did it that way, but... It was understandable why people were not happy with it. So, yeah, I think that they should have just done Hrothgar. If they wanted to do Hrothgar, they should have just done Hrothgar and make it available to both genders. And there’s also a thing with the Au’ra. There’s a huge difference in size - even certain features, the male Au’ra can have, like, black - the whites of their eyes can be black instead. The female Au’ra can’t have that. On top of that they’re super small, they are the smallest race excluding Lalafel. And so there is this big contrast between the male Au’ra and the female Au’ra. Which is kinda ehhhh. Like, is that really necessary? To have such a difference between the two? It’s kind of eh. Especially when it’s always the dudes who are big and the female characters who are small. Whether it’s the Aura or the Hrothgar and Viera. So it’s like eh. More variety for each gender would be nice. So, yeah. I think that’s it. Oh yeah! There’s one more thing regarding clothing in the game. Because clothing tends to be very gendered in the game, actually. A lot of basic gear is the same kinda. There are a few skimpy outfits. But, okay, there are a few skimpy outfits that will be skimpy for both genders. But there are sometimes outfits that are slightly skimpier for females. Like, for instance the level 50 bard outfit, it has like a little boob window which only exists for females. The male has some tissue there. And also certain crafted outfits are just only for a gender. Especially the big - I think one of the big offenders is the paid outfit, like from the cash shop. They tend to be like very gendered. Every time they make like two completely different outfits and it’s like, “ah, this one is only for men and this one is only for females characters.” It’s kind of eh. Like why can’t you make an outfit and just make it fit all body types? Because that’s one reason the devs have given for their gender restriction. It’s like if we make this outfit available for every gender then we have to put work to adapt it to every model to every body type in the game. And I understand that but when they make two different outfits - two completely different designs - and then restrict it to only one category, one set of body types, it’s like eh. Is it really less work? I don’t really believe it. Especially when this is a paid outfit and it’s pretty pricey. So, they’ve been getting better with that with gendered outfits. They’ve been announcing that they will make the marriage outfit available to all genders. I’ve seen some data mining that they are going to do the same with a number of crafted items. There is one in particular that I really want to wear with my female character. I hope it gets added but we’ll see. So, they’ve been getting better but the cash shop is still kind of eh. The cash shop I find kind of annoying because the female version is almost always a dress. It’s like yeah, it’s not always quite the same dress but it’s always a dress. Where the male version is often something very unique. Like for instance there was this kind of mafia - I think it was inspired by Chinese mafia - it was this outfit that was really different. It even had, like, knives on the side or something. It has really a particular identity. And for the females it was like “yeah, here’s one more dress.” It’s like, “okay, thanks! [sarcastic]” It’s not always the case, but so often it’s just like, eh, here is one more dress for female characters because we don’t have enough of those [sarcastic]. Anyway, so, they’ve been getting better but

the clothing can be - oh yeah! There was - I can't believe I forgot about - So, they had 2B outfits which everybody can wear. But then, the gear you get from the new raid, the actual gear, is changed to something completely different depending on your character's gender. Like, if you're playing a female character the gear changes into a dress. If you're playing a male character, it's like a coat. It's like, okay, it's cool we got the 2B outfit which is purely glamour which is available to everybody. So, it's like one step forward but at the same time one step forward where the gear that's tied to everything is still completely different in terms of appearance based on gender. And again it's like, you designed two completely different outfits. You can't tell me this is less work than just making one outfit and make it fit everybody. That was a lot of examples, but...

Interviewer: That's great, that's good. So, if you could think about different ways to portray gender or, like, declare gender in a system like this, what would be some things that would be important to you?

Participant: On the top of my head, I'm not sure how I would answer this. Because sometimes when you give too many options to the player, it starts to feel a little impersonal. I'm going to mention another game which is Read Only Memories. What this game does is at the beginning, it asks you "hey, what are your character's pronouns?" It asks you even about your character's diet. I don't know if it comes up anywhere, I don't remember. Anyway, so it asks you that question. Other than that your character doesn't really feel like it really exists in the world. They try to make you feel like that. Like you have a sister that's mentioned. One major character is the ex of your sister. So it tries to give your character relationships to make it feel like you belong in this world, but it doesn't really succeed in my opinion. Your character feels like a ghost that's kind of there and it feels kind of impersonal. Yeah other characters will refer to you with your pronouns but that's kind of it. So, Read Only Memories is maybe not the best comparison because there is no character creator physically. It's in first person but it really feels like your character has no body. You don't really feel like you are in the game or your player character is. So, yeah there is that. And so, again, I don't know if that is a good comparison, but that is one that I often think about. It's like, okay, this game tried but I don't really think it succeeded. And I've seen other games do something similar. But so, I think the classic - the kind of go-to solution is to make it so that pronouns are selected separately from the physical appearance of your character. Then again, pronouns by themselves are not an indication of your character's gender. Like, maybe you think of your character as a woman and maybe you want other characters to mention that. But pronouns are not inherently a mention of that. And so it's kind of weird, like, how do you create a system where you can say a) the player character's gender is recognized but secondly you want it to be trans friendly to like a pronoun that you set freely. That's kind of what I mean when I say, like, it can feel impersonal if it gives you too much freedom. Because that freedom is based on an absence. Like ideally a character creator should have a way to recognize the gender of your character on one side and the pronoun on another. I don't think I've seen a character creator anywhere do that. It's either one or the other. Never both. Again, it's easier said than done, I think. It depends on the type of game, the type of character creator. Um, but yeah, like the opposite example would be like, in Dragon Age Inquisition if you create a male character, other characters will mention that your character is male because it's important. For instance, at one point in the game there is the equivalent of a new pope that needs to be elected but the pope in that world can only be a woman. If you say

“hey, I’m kind of a religious figure (as part of the plot in the game), why can’t I be the pope?” If your character is male, the other character is going to say “well, you’re a dude, so you can’t.” But some people they select their character as being male in the game but they think of their character as nonbinary, they don’t think of their character as male. So, here is like the game again ,it just - it can’t - I’m trying to explain my example. It’s kind of the opposite problem where you only select gender and not pronouns. Ideally, you should do both. Recognize the gender, recognize the pronouns. That way you can have dialogue that’s meaningful - It’s meaningful dialogue for a character to say “hey, you’re a dude and as part of the lore, your character cannot be the new pope.” But then that indication that your character is male needs to be actually accurate. Because if the character is kind of thinking something else then it’s kind of not working. Then the opposite problem is when it’s only pronouns and your character’s gender is not recognized. I hope that’s clear.

Interviewer: Yeah! Yeah, I totally get it. So, I just have one more question for you based on, I think - I think this is your survey response, I’m just double checking so I don’t ask you a question and you have no idea what I’m asking you. So, if you could talk about your experiences being in an LGBTQ+ Free Company and how that’s impacted your experience in the game.

Participant: Yeah, that was actually probably the best decision that I’ve made in this game. I was kind of hesitant actually, at first, because the name is somewhat questionable. The name of the FC. Because it’s - so the name is “Make Eorzea Gay Again” which is, like okay but, maybe it sends the wrong message. But, I talked with the leaders of the FC about it, it was like, okay - I accepted the explanation and ended up joining. As I said, that was the best decision I’ve made. Before that I kind of played solo. And I think, so, first of all, a group of players to play with was great and do events and stuff like that. But also a space, within the game, within the context of the game where I can express my queerness. Especially like, so, our discord for the FC has a not safe for work section and I ended up getting pretty active in there because it was a space where I could - I’ve never really had before an LGBT space to express myself in and here I got one. That has been really positive to me, like much more than I even expected. The game actually allowed me to find this community and to join it and to make a space for myself there. So yeah, it’s not a space I would have really found otherwise. Uh, so yeah, I think that’s what I can say about it.

Interviewer: Awesome. Well, those are all my questions for you. So, thank you so much for your thoughtful answers.

Participant #2 Interview

Interviewer: So, the first question is how many characters do you have?

Participant: Yeah, I think it was five and it’s still five.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to have a main?

Participant: Yeah. So, it’s just one character that I kind of focus everything on. The rest are just roleplay, so.

Interviewer: So, was that the motivation for creating alternate characters? Like to have different personas?

Participant: Yeah. Kind of like different personas, different races, different body types.

Interviewer: So, does your main character resemble anybody? Did you model it after anyone? Or was it an ideal?

Participant: Not really. I kind of just went crazy in the character creator. He's also one of the races that isn't really - it's kind of humanoid but doesn't really resemble anybody in real life. You can't really model anybody with that race. You get what I mean.

Interviewer: What race is your - ?

Participant: He's an Au'ra.

Interviewer: Did you - like, what specific aesthetic choices did you make while creating your character? Like, what were some thought processes that you had, if you can remember?

Participant: Well, I remember jacking up his height all the way because I have a height issue. For myself. Like, I'm pretty short. I'm only like 5'3". So, when I saw that I could make a male character that was towering over everybody else it gives me a good feeling. Like a feeling of power. [laughing]

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah, I totally get that. Were there any other specific choices you made besides the height? Or was it just that?

Participant: Well, from what I could do - most of it was just like - I just went with what looked right. I kind of have a recurring theme for some of my characters' appearances, but... It's just color combinations that I think look good or something. And I just kind of go with the flow.

Interviewer: When you are creating a character do you tend to use presets more or do you manipulate individual sliders?

Participant: I start by looking at the presets and then I find one that I like and I edit it from there. So, I usually go into the - I kind of start from the top and work my way down to more and more detailed sliders.

Interviewer: So, this is another question that was also in the survey. How would you describe your relationship with this character?

Participant: Well, I've had him for two years and I'm very attached to him. He's my son and if anything happened to him I would - like, I don't think I could ever change him or anything. Like, I've barely changed his appearance in that long, so. Like, it's kind of like the very masculine side of me. He kind of has the body that I wish I had and everything. We kind of have similar

personalities. It kind of bled through while I was writing his character. But he's not based off me or anything.

Interviewer: Writing the character? Do you have like - have you written, like, fanfic about your character or anything like that?

Participant: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Really?

Participant: Yeah, I roleplay but I also write fanfic.

Interviewer: That's awesome!

Participant: Yeah, I think it's just for like - like, roleplay is - when you have roleplay you can't really roleplay as the hero... Or people don't like that. And I understand why. So, I just do fanfic so I get to write him as the Warrior of Light. So, I keep them in separate realms. Roleplay is where I just have him as, like, a regular guy.

Interviewer: Do you - is this fanfic something that you post online somewhere or is it, like, just personal for you?

Participant: It's just personal but that's because I haven't finished it yet.

Interviewer: Okay, I gotcha.

Participant: And I'm very picky about my own work, so. But if it was finished I totally would.

Interviewer: I totally get that.

Participant: I would send it to you but it's kind of, to be honest it's kind of self-indulgent gay fanfic, so. It's nothing explicit! It's just self indulgent gay fan fic.

Interviewer: [Laughing] That's amazing. It's okay. I just - I asked because you're not the first person who I've interviewed has written fanfic about their character. Everyone I've interviewed about their character so far has. Which is interesting. So, you kind of mentioned this before but have you ever used a Phial of Fantasia? Why did you use it if you did and how frequently do you use them?

Participant: Well, it depends on the character. Sometimes I've done it to completely - just to completely rework a character when I think I'm not having any creative juice for them. But, I think for my main. Okay, I think I'm starting to have two mains a bit. I have two characters that I clearly prefer over the others. I recently just did a Phantasia on them to edit minor features like I changed her voice because in combat it was very annoying. So, there's that and I bumped her height up a bit. There's like very minor tweaks. For my actual main I just - the only Fantasia I ever used on him was once to jack up his tail length all the way because I liked a long tail. I think

I actually didn't start out playing him as my main character, that was before I even got into roleplay. My first Phantasia technically was to change my first character into a roleplay character.

Interviewer: That's awesome. Cool. If Phials of Fantasia were free do you think you would use them more often?

Participant: Probably. I probably wouldn't do big changes all the time but if I have something - if I wanted to like mess around with my friends and turn into a Lalafel for a day as a joke and they were free, I would definitely do it. Without a doubt. Really just for shenanigans. If I could like tweak body type or something.. Yeah.

Interviewer: Cool. So, do you use the glamour system and if you do how frequently do you use it?

Participant: All the time. Like so many times I can't even count. So, what I do is I have glammers for - well, I'm trying to get glammers for every one of - I'm that kind of person that levels all the classes, so. I think right now I have a glamour for each type of DPS and everything. Like a glamour for tanks, a glamour for healers. So, I use the glamour plate system a lot to kind of just switch and sometimes - I have like five glammers for Dragoon which is my main job so sometimes I'll just - everyday I'll switch to a different glamour. It's pretty fun. I like it.

Interviewer: Dragoon squad! I play a Dragoon too.

Participant: Yeah, I've played it since I started.

Interviewer: So, when you are making these glamour plates is it because there's like a cannon "look" that you want your character to have? Or is it because like "oh, this armor set is really ugly and I want to look a certain way?"

Participant: Just because - most of the time it's just because I want to look a certain way. Because when I roleplay, I'll change outfits. Well, depending on, like, the situation. Say if my character's in like Ishgard and it's freezing, I'm not going to have him be shirtless. But anywhere else I'll just - most of the time I just swap on a whim. But, occasionally I'll just have this feeling like, "I'm feeling this outfit for today." Or "this outfit isn't for the roleplay character, it's for for the Warrior of Light character so I'm not going to wear that while I roleplay." So, I just switch. I love that you can switch with just one click.

Interviewer: Yeah, totally.

Participant: I just - like everybody else I wish there were more slots.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's true. How frequently do you roleplay?

Participant: I'd say pretty often. Not every day but at least a few times a week.

Interviewer: And you have like a... Are you in a Free Company that's like roleplay centric?

Participant: Not really. My main roleplay group - well they are a free company but they're not limited to the free company.

Interviewer: Ah, okay.

Participant: My free company does roleplay but we aren't centered around it.

Interviewer: Do you think that like the roleplay that you're doing is influencing choices that you make about your character in other aspects of the game?

Participant: I mean, for my main, not really. Because I kind of just do whatever I want. Like, I'm leveling everything on him even though he'd be terrible at magic I still level the healers. But, when it comes to my alternate characters I usually only level stuff that makes sense for them.

Interviewer: Do you feel like there are any traits that you have that you project onto the character?

Participant: A lot of my characters tend to not be very outgoing. I think that's just because of my social anxiety or the fact that I'm kind of just like really introverted. So, I kind of struggle to play more extraverted characters in the first place.

Interviewer: That makes sense.

Participant: I could probably think of other things, but not really right now.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's totally fine. Okay, so now moving on to questions that are more about the tool itself, so, do you think that Final Fantasy XIV's current avatar creation tool is limited in any way?

Participant: Body-wise, like, absolutely. Now, I have a particular gripe with the Viera. Because they purposely made the Viera's boobs bigger than the other races. I have a transgender male character and that kind of really bothers me when I can't make a flat-chested character. I don't think you can even make a flat chest character without modding your game. So, like a lot of the gear on that race specifically will have bigger breast sizes than say - like, if an elezen wore the same shirt her boobs wouldn't be as big as the Viera's. Even though the slider values are the same. That really, ugh, god, it's annoying! Because sometimes whenever I find a shirt that I want to wear on my character, like, it'll - I have to - I kind of head cannon that he has a total flat chest, but the shirt is just boobs in your face in a very not elegant way. Ugh, I wish I could just customize that more. I wish every race had a muscle definition slider. But only the humans have it. Well, I think Hyurs and Roguedins have them but not any other race. And that bothers me a bit. Yeah, everybody's just limited to one body. The only things you can kind of change are just breast size, height, and tail size. Not really much else besides that.

Interviewer: Are there any things that you really like about the creation tool that Final Fantasy XIV uses?

Participant: I can definitely think of some, just let me think right now. I'm kind of fiddling around to help me think of something. I don't mind being limited to presets for face options since they give you a decent amount so that you don't really have a character that looks alike. Well, there's not really a high chance of getting a character that looks alike to another character. Like, only rarely you'll find a doppelganger but usually you'll have like one facial feature that's different. I think they did a good job on the faces. There's a lot of voice diversity. Hair color customization, even if it's a palette, it's like a really big palette compared to a game like the Sims 4 which would only have, say, five colors for hair. You can at least pick from - I don't even know how many there are. I would guess that there are 255 but that's just the programmer in me.

Interviewer: Yeah, there's quite a few.

Participant: I kind of wish there were a lot more hairs for all races. Or gender neutral stuff. But they've already kind of done a good job by making new hairs unisex. Say if they have the hair buns hairstyle or like the long - I don't know how to describe it - it's like that long, eastern style hair. And it's not limited by gender and I like that. I personally wouldn't use it but I like it - I like that. Like, you're not limited to only the masculine hair on the male character. But the Viera and Hrothgar obviously don't get as many of those options and it makes me kind of sad. I know a lot of my friends have complained about the limited hairs but they're kind of their own issue. That's something that I could make conjectures about but that would be just extending this.

Interviewer: That's okay. How do you feel specifically about the options for gender in Final Fantasy XIV?

Participant: Well, I have a big issue with the gender locked races. I think in the very first version of the game, I heard there were gender locks and they eventually removed that. So, like, I kind of have faith that Square Enix is going to eventually remove the gender locks on Hrothgar and Viera but - Okay, I'm a binary transgender person, so I don't really have an issue with genders here. The only thing I can think of right now is the difference between male and female Aura. I really don't like it. I kind of wish we had more options to make tall, buff females. Because if female Aura were taller and more like the males, I would, without a doubt, play one.

Interviewer: Right and the female version of the Aura is the smallest race, I think. I mean, excluding Lalafel.

Participant: Besides Lalafel. It's like their animations are all kind of like too dainty for me. And I think I tried to play one once but the animations didn't really fit her character so I kind of just like, "ah, whatever." I think I've had some success in making androgynous characters but the thing is I don't have the perspective of a nonbinary person. So, I can't really speak on that a lot but I was able to make a sort of convincing male-looking Viera. Not really, eh.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Participant: It's like I'm kind of learning how to work the facial features to make it look as not feminine as possible. But it's not really that easy with the options they give. Like I'm trying to make one right now.

Interviewer: Right now?

Participant: Just fiddling around.

Interviewer: If you could change specifically the gender system in Final Fantasy XIV whether that's how it's declared or gender locked races or gender locked outfits, how would you - in your ideal system - what would that look like?

Participant: Ideally, I wouldn't have any gender locked outfits. Oh, one big thing for me is letting you choose your pronouns in the quests. In the quest dialogue you get referred to by like either he/him or she/her pronouns based on your character's biological sex and that kind of bothers me. I don't mind picking a biological sex for your body but it kind of - sometimes I feel like I'm - it's like the boob issue with the Viera. Sometimes I feel like it's a bit sexualized. Like, I feel like I'm kind of locked into making a feminine character. I've had, I don't know what I was going to say, I forgot for a second.

Interviewer: That's okay!

Participant: Let me think if there's anything else I would change. Well, I mean obviously gender isn't binary. Like, I can't think of a method to remedy that really. Because, again, I'm not nonbinary. I don't really trust myself to do that. Even though I understand that gender is more of a spectrum and everything. I can't really think of - well, with the current system I can't really think of it.

Interviewer: That's totally fine. There was another participant when I asked this question, they had talked about a system where pronoun declaration and gender declaration are separate. Where it's like, someone uses she/her pronouns but from someone's pronouns you don't know how they identify. So, like, maybe they're like a trans fem nonbinary person and they want their body referred to in like a nonbinary even though they use those pronouns.

Participant: Yeah, pronoun selection would be my biggest thing. Like I don't think it would be that hard to implement.

Interviewer: Right and it's probably already a flag somewhere.

Participant: Yeah because they already have a flag for he/him and she/her pronouns. I don't think having a flag for they/them would be that hard. Then there's the issue of having more and more pronouns but just having they/them is a big step.

Interviewer: That's true, I agree. These are all of the questions that I have written down here!

Participant #3 Interview

Interviewer: How many characters do you have?

Participant: Um, four.

Interviewer: Four. Okay. Do you consider yourself to have a main of these four characters?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: So, is there a reason that you have four characters?

Participant: Um, the first character I made was on the free week you get with the game. Then I made another one just to test out the um, abilities of the character creator.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Participant: Then I made my main one just so I could be on the same server as my wife.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Participant: The final one I made just so I could test it after the DLC came out.

Interviewer: Awesome. Who does your main character resemble? Or did you model it after anyone or was it just like an idea you had in your head?

Participant: It was just sort of an idea I had in my head.

Interviewer: What specific aesthetic choices did you make while creating your character?

Participant: Um, I guess I just made her sort of small and feminine. I guess that's how I would describe it.

Interviewer: When you were.. Uh.. Was there a particular race in the character creator that drew you towards it?

Participant: Yes. It was the dragon race. Au'ra I believe it's pronounced.

Interviewer: So, this is also a question that was also on the survey. But, uh, how would you describe your relationship with that character?

Participant: I sort of view her as like, I guess a fantasized version of myself.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Participant: Kind of like how when people create Dungeons and Dragons characters they might - they kind of view it as "if I was in this world this is what I think I would look like," in a way?

Interviewer: That's cool. Do you feel like the lore of the Final Fantasy universe informed the physical appearance of your character?

Participant: Um, I'm not sure what that means, actually.

Interviewer: So, you were talking about with Dungeons and Dragons, "If I were in this world, I would look like this." So, do you feel like, um, the story of the universe informed choices about how you made your look like. Like, "Oh, this race would have this type of tail or this color hair."

Participant: Not really. I just kind of created them in a way. I didn't really think about the world as a whole.

Interviewer: Okay. So, have you ever written any fiction about your character?

Participant: No. Not at all.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you in - how would you describe the way that you engage with the game? Like, are you in any roleplaying communities? Or do you play it mostly for the raids and dungeons? Or for the story?

Participant: Mainly for raids and dungeons. Occasionally whenever there's a seasonal event.

Interviewer: Mhm. Have you ever used a Phial of Fantasia?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: Okay. If Phials of Fantasia were free do you feel like you would use them at all?

Participant: Probably more often than I would hope.

Interviewer: You might not know the answer to this question, and that's totally fine - If you were to use a Phial of Fantasia what aspects of your character do you think you would change?

Participant: Maybe the race. Character height. That's really it as far as I can think of.

Interviewer: Do you use the glamour system?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: How frequently do you use it?

Participant: As often as I get a nice, pretty piece of armor. I'll probably use it right away. It's mainly just kind of held back by what's required to use it in the first place.

Interviewer: Do you find yourself using the system because you don't like the way that good stat gear is or do you have a cannon outfit maybe that your character wears?

Participant: I usually use it because for specific points, all of the gear you get is quite uniform and nothing stands out so when you're in those pits between levels.

Interviewer: Cool. So, going back to the creation tool, do you feel limited - or did you feel limited in any way by it?

Participant: Yes, I felt the facial design of it was very limited. You couldn't really change many things. It was just preset faces for the most part.

Interviewer: So, going off of that, did you feel yourself manipulating the sliders for different values more than using facial presets?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: How do you feel about how gender is modeled in Final Fantasy XIV?

Participant: Slightly upset. Especially with the recent issues with the whole gender-locking certain races.

Interviewer: Mhm. If you could change anything about the way that gender is handled in Final Fantasy XIV how would you change it? Like in an ideal system?

Participant: I would have it simply just be text, if anything. It doesn't stop you from using certain armor or using certain cosmetics or customizations on your characters.

Interviewer: How do you feel about some of the gendered interactions that you might have with NPCs?

Participant: I've never really noticed any. I haven't really played a ton of the story content, so I'm not sure how much there is.

Interviewer: Okay, that's totally fine.

Participant: But, sometimes their stuff is good. Like they have an event called "Little Lady's Day." Pretty much everything in it is not gender locked. All the male characters can get the stuff. So, it's not terrible.

Interviewer: Okay, that's good! Alright, these are all the questions that I have.

[Participant #4 Interview](#)

Interviewer: How many characters do you have?

Participant: I actually have two main ones that I play. Both of them are on Chaos, so. I have alts but they're not played. They've mainly been to help people - like with decorating or starting an FC.

Interviewer: Would you consider both of these two characters to be like your mains or do you like prefer one character over the other?

Participant: One's technically my main. It's the one I've got the most work on and that. I've spent like two hundred days on it. Play time. Total.

Interviewer: Wow. That's awesome.

Participant: Yeah, it's pretty good. I can just switch between the both of them, so.

Interviewer: Was there a specific reason for having the two main characters?

Participant: The first one tended to be because I made friends through it. Got involved, things like that. Then people left and were on break and it got lonely. So, I was like, "oh, I'll just start a new character on Spriggan" because it was a new server and lots of people were online doing stuff. I ended up getting into an FC there and making friends. So now I have two main characters. Which is fun!

Interviewer: It is fun! Twice the character is twice the fun.

Participant: Mhm. [laughing]

Interviewer: Did you - when you were initially creating these characters did you model them specifically after anything or anybody? Or did you kind of let them evolve as you explored the character creation tool?

Participant: Well, by the time I made the second one I pretty much knew what I liked in the character creation. But my first - I mean, I'm a Fantasia addict. Literally. I change like, at least once or twice a month. Race. Sex. It doesn't matter. Whichever one I want to be. Yeah. By the time the second came round I already knew what I liked, so. It took only maybe a couple of minutes to create it.

Interviewer: Did you make any specific aesthetic choices that you can remember?

Participant: I always add freckles because I have freckles in real life. So, I always add the face paint that looks like freckles.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned being a Fantasia addict.

Participant: Yeah. [laughing]

Interviewer: When you use Phials of Fantasia are there aspects of the character that you typically change or is it just completely redone?

Participant: Generally I tend to make them look semi-similar. I might change like hair color, eye color, that's about it. Otherwise I tend to have what I like and I will go to that. Like if I'm doing an Au'ra I like [unintelligible - black tips?]. Yeah, I like looking like that. So, it's just mainly like eye color really that changes.

Interviewer: If Phials of Fantasia were free do you think you would use them more often? Or are you happy with changing once a month-ish?

Participant: If they were free I probably would use them a lot more. One day I'd be this, another day I'd be that. Because I start to change when I think "Oh, I want to be something else." You know, I've had like five on a character at one point and used them all within a week.

Interviewer: Wow. So it usually stems from like boredom with your current appearance?

Participant: Yeah it's just like "ehh, I might change it. Change it up." When I discovered Fantasia I was like "ooooo." I was talking to a friend who was like "You know you can buy them" and I was like [gasp]. Yeah, I haven't looked back. I think I've spent way too much on Fantasias.

Interviewer: How would you describe - this was another question that was also on the survey - How would you describe your relationship with either one of your main characters?

Participant: It's one of the things that's interesting to study You sympathize with the character because it's you but it's you in the game so it's an idealized version of you. It's what you - like, I've never played a Hyur. I tried it. Didn't like it. But I never play a Hyur because, well, as a fantasy game I don't want to be me. In a way.

Interviewer: Right.

Participant: So, I'll tend to play things like Au'ra, Lalas... I love Lalas. I'm a Lala at the moment. Viera on my Spriggan account. Lala on my Chaos account. Best of both worlds. I'm tall and short. For Au'ra girls I tend to be the shortest that they can be. But with Viera I'm the tallest. You tend to... As people say, it's an escape. It's a way to get away from real life because it is a fantasy game, so. It's what you could be if you were in that world. Like people say, you know, "Why don't you try this - " So many times I've had people say, "Oh, you should be doing x-x-x this way." People don't understand that you're playing the game you want to play the way you want to play it. So, even if, well, that's technically the best rotation and you should be doing it, it's like "well, at the moment I don't give a fuck. I'm playing my game the way I want to play it." It's for me.

Interviewer: Right, exactly. So, when you interact with others in the virtual world, do you feel like you're acting as yourself or is there some sort of persona that you have acting as your character?

Participant: I think in a way, you're more free to be yourself because a lot of interactions in Final Fantasy is mainly text. So, in a way you're free to be more like yourself because you're not in person. You're not - you say what you want to say and mean it. And in - like, in real life that can be extremely hard especially, like myself, I have social anxiety. It's extremely hard if I'm in a group to be extremely outgoing. Where in Final Fantasy, I love being in groups, because you know. I'll still be a little shy until I'm comfortable but I'm really more outgoing and talkative in the game than I am in real life because it's - I was going to say it's a separate persona it's a way to get yourself out there.

Interviewer: Right. So, how would you describe your engagement with the game itself? Are you in any roleplaying communities? Do you play just for like dungeons and raid content? Or story?

Participant: I've been flirting with RP. Like, I've been looking into it. I've seen events and thought, "oh, this looks interesting" but I just haven't had the gumption to go up and do it yet. Mainly because I haven't worked out a backstory and I know that's something you really need with the RP. But that is something I would like to get into. So, I'm currently inching towards that. But a lot of times I go into the social aspect with my FC friends and running content with them. So, it's a good game for that.

Interviewer: Have you ever written any fiction about your character? Or do you have a headcanon of how your character might act or respond in different situations?

Participant: Like I said, starting to kind of work that out now. I really haven't done anything.

Interviewer: That's totally fine. So, how about the glamour system? Do you use it? How frequently do you use it?

Participant: I use it quite a bit. Especially on my main. Like, I've nearly filled my glamour dresser. Yeah about three hundred and seventy items in there.

Interviewer: Wow. That's awesome.

Participant: Yeah, that's not including the ones that are in the armoire - the event stuff and things like that. Seasonal. That you can shove in there. So, that saves me maybe 40 or 50 more slots. It's like "Just throw it in there!"

Interviewer: So, when you choose to glamour different gear is it "I just don't like the way this armor looks, so I'm gonna take this outfit that's cooler, I think and slap it on top?"

Participant: Generally.

Interviewer: Generally?

Participant: Generally, yeah. There are certain like arm pieces that you like and it's like, "I don't want to change from that because it's cool!" or you'll dye it and it's like "sweet." Like

current Nier gear. That looks pretty cool. The only thing I really don't like is that the fending dress looks like the healer dress. It looks so cool on the dudes! They have a little cape and everything! And the girls get this stupid dress that looks like a - like you're going to a catholic school. It's like shoot me in the head now. And I know this because I was a boy a couple days ago and I was rocking the nice little cape and everything and then I was a Lala girl and I'm wearing this Catholic school, private school dress and it's like uggghhhh.

Interviewer: How do you feel about how Final Fantasy makes gender specific versions of the same set of gear?

Participant: Sometimes in a way it's cute. But then other times you look at it and it's like "I wish that guys could wear pretty stuff that the girls have." There are so many pairs of boots that the girls have would look awesome on a dude. They can't wear them and it's like "Oh! I feel for them." It's really annoying when it's genderlocked because literally when I'm a dude, half of my glamour dresser is black. It's like, "god damn it! Half my glamour options are gone!"

Interviewer: So, moving on to questions more focused on the specifics of the avatar creation tool itself. DO you feel that it's limiting in any way? The system as it currently is?

Participant: I've actually heard people complain a little bit about skin color. One guy he's got - is in a fashion Discord I'm in - he's got basically that caramel skin color because I think he's African American. I mean, he's American so, yeah, African American. But yeah, he's got that beautiful caramel color but he hasn't been able to get it in game. He's like, "I wish that I could get it." So, I've heard people say, "I wish there was more skin tones" or you could do that slider that you see in other avatar games. You could do and choose the color that way.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the options for gender in Final Fantasy? I did ask you a little bit about the outfits but I think the question is trying to get more at how gender is modeled in the avatar creation tool.

Participant: In a way, it's not too bad for me. Because I'll be a guy if I want to be a guy, I'll be a girl if I want to be a girl. I think the people who want to - I tend to make my Miquotes very androgynous looking. You know like you'd be looking and if you didn't know it was a guy you'd be like, "is that a guy or a girl?" So, it's there but it's like - for people who want to be androgynous If they could slim the body and stuff like that than it'd probably be a lot more helpful for them. Even if you wanted to be a guy or a girl if you could still do that like for a girl you could flesh it out a bit more to make it look more androgynous and stuff like that. Or like specific emotes.

Interviewer: When you are creating characters in Final Fantasy XIV do you find yourself more often using the preset options or do you go in and tinker with the sliders?

Participant: Oh, I'm always custom. I'm always going in and as I said I have a tendency to know what I like. So, I'll pick this and I'll look at the eyes and this eye and it's mainly like I said the colors that tend to be my thing. I'll go like "Oh, I want to wear this, or I want to wear that."

Interviewer: Is there any part of the system that you really like? Something you think Final Fantasy XIV does really well? In terms of character creation.

Participant: In a way I like that they've got the options they've got. There is a big range of options available to you even though it could probably be more, like, better. It's still pretty good at the moment because you can modify your character the way you want it and if you don't like that, well, try another race. See if you like that better.

Interviewer: So, I think, yeah, I think that's it!

Participant #5 Interview

Interviewer: So, some of these questions were also in the screening survey and I'm asking them again as a refresher but also to give you an opportunity to answer in a little bit more depth for some of them. Okay, so the first question is how many characters do you have?

Participant: I have one main and I'm slowly working on two alts. I technically have alts from other times I tried to play the game and didn't - those two are really just early iterations of what's become my main. I basically have a character per data center so I can play with different people.

Interviewer: Okay. So, it's a little like the practicality of having extra characters on different worlds?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: Does your main character resemble anyone? What was your process like for creating this character that you consider to be your main character?

Participant: Well, okay so her appearance is kind of interesting. I made one design and that's not what she looks like anymore because Final Fantasy XIV has an item called Fantasia. Which, you use it - you get some for free and then you can pay real world currency to get more. Anyways, you use it and then you can go back into the character creator and totally change it up to whatever you want. So, originally - they basically have the two human races. The difference is like one of them are more fair skinned and they're smaller. Originally my concept was just tiny girl who wields big swords and hits them. But once I started playing with friends and actually thinking about my character as an actual character with like pieces of me in it and stuff like that, I wanted to model it more after kind of just like the idealized female Final Fantasy protagonist. So, I switched her over to the darker skinned to go back into my Arab heritage model and with their pathetic muscle slider jack her up as much as possible and go from there.

Interviewer: Cool.

Participant: Also just because I don't get a chance to say it in the game, she is nonbinary but uses she/her.

Interviewer: Cool. So, can you describe - you did just talk a little bit about it - you're relationship with that character?

Participant: So, yeah, I guess kind of talking about that specifically in a more macro, theoretical sense; I guess, like she is a conduit for interacting with specific internet friends in specific contexts and expressing agency in collective storytelling and de-stressing.

Interviewer: How would you describe your engagement with Final Fantasy XIV itself? Are you in any roleplaying communities? Do you play mostly for dungeon and raid content? Or for story?

Participant: I guess it's two-fold. With Shadowbringers the scales have kind of flipped because the story in the latest patch was very interesting. But before that it was first and foremost a tool to spend time with friends but now it's an interesting story that I like to pick apart the lore of that also doubles as a venue for spending time with friends. Even though that sounds like the same statement it's also, like, the scales are flipped slightly.

Interviewer: Have you ever written fan fiction about your character?

Participant: I have! I have a little one-shot that was like a dramatic retelling of me and three of my friend's characters run through a dungeon but then like in our collective half lore - I don't participate in roleplay, but, we talk a lot about what would our character be like narratively and how we would shift XIV's narrative to better make our playing of the game exist as some sort of semi-cannon.

Interviewer: Are these friends that you're interacting with on a regular basis, did you make them through the game? Or are they friends that you already had and this is like a thing that you do with them?

Participant: I would say that these are friends that I already had but through the game I would say that the relationships got stronger.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like the persona of your character or the physical appearance of your character influences the way that you interact with other people in the game or the game's world?

Participant: I'd say yeah because like one of my favorite parts of the game is they have this system where you can make your best armor look like other armor in the game and you'd have more of a fashion. I'd say because of - I'd made model decisions based off how it would look on my character based on how it looks on another character in the game.

Interviewer: Now moving into questions about Phials of Fantasia which you already talked about - but you mentioned using a Phial of Phantasia once to modify your character. Have you ever used it again after that?

Participant: No. It was - the time I used it is when I went from disinterest in this as something I was going to get over quickly. At that point it was the third time I had tried playing the game. I had started playing the game and wasn't convinced it was going to stick because I bounced so hard the first two times. So, once it stuck and there was dissatisfaction with my original thing

and I wanted it to be more not reflective of me but reflective of a “me” I wanted to create in this space.

Interviewer: If Phials of Fantasia were free, do you think that you would use them more often?

Participant: I don't think I would. Actually, I guess it would depend on how easy they are to get. Like if you can just say do it once a month. Let's say you can do a character change once a month. I would probably do it pretty frequently to explore other characters. Because I have a history of roleplaying in other formats. So, if I could temporarily create a character. It would have to come with a name change. So, if the Phial of Fantasia came with a name change, I would but if it didn't come with a name change, no.

Interviewer: That's a thoughtful answer, thank you. So before you talked about the glamour system, so I'll ask more directly - do you use the glamour system and how frequently do you use it if you do?

Participant: So, generally, I'm not super interested in MMO end games. So, I do like designing appearances for the different classes. So, my end game often becomes finding the perfect armor for each class at that level. It's in that sense that I use the glamour system. Where I'm trying to create this idealized form of this class or this character in this narrative structure.

Interviewer: Cool. I had a question in my brain and it's gone now. Okay! So, moving on to questions specifically about the character creation tool itself. Making your character initially, did you feel limited in any way by the options that were presented to you?

Participant: Yeah. In the context - well, I mean it's a character creation tool. I messed around pretty extensively with the Blak Desert character creation tool which has a lot going for it. So, I remember looking at the degree of sliders. Certain ways to handle hair color and saturation and stuff and being a little confused about the decisions they had made which I imagine are probably tied to the horrible underlying architecture from 1.0. But, anyway, I definitely remember points of frustration. Like, “why isn't there just a little bit more here?”

Interviewer: So, specifically with you it's just a lack of options in general? Just with everything?

Participant: It's like you have sliders that barely - it barely registers a change. Ultimately you're changing three to four features and most of the time you won't even see some of them.

Interviewer: So, are you somebody who uses presets or do you like to manipulate the sliders for different features?

Participant: I don't remember a lot of options to manipulate the sliders. I think my favorite character creator right now, ignoring the resource limits it has, was like the code vein character creator. Where there weren't so many sliders, there were just like so many preset options, it was like having a slider. Because, like, I hate getting bogged down in the minutiae of two to three

degrees of difference of the angle of the bridge of your nose. When there's a lot of very quick, obvious differences and options to choose from, I like that.

Interviewer: Was there anything that you particularly liked about Final Fantasy XIV's tool?

Participant: I would need to look at it to really refresh my memory but like I remember I liked the fact that, the lighting engine isn't the greatest, but I liked the fact that in the creation process it gives you the option to choose these different lighting engines and see what it's going to look like in a scene at night, a scene in the day. I also like... Yeah, that's like, the main thing.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fine. That's good. How do you feel specifically about the options for gender in Final Fantasy?

Participant: It's about what I'd expect from a game coming out of Japan in the triple A industry. But, marginally disappointing especially when you do have this like - it feels like they put certain boxes in place that they didn't need to put in place. Like, just for the sake of making an easy to use character creator with more options, not having those boxes would be better.

Interviewer: Something that FFXIV also does that I'm sure that you know, but I also want to talk more specifically about is gender locking outfits and races.

Participant: Yeah, that's right because gender locks is a recent step backwards for them.

Interviewer: I was just curious about your thoughts on those two things.

Participant: I think nineteen out of twenty times I don't understand the point of gender locking anything with clothing. There are certain things where they require say a bust on the model for the clothes to be working right in their physics engine. And, okay, sure we'll give them that. But with the recent change - they recently put out this specific item in the current raid event that is based off a female character and male and female characters can both wear it and it completely changes your body type. With that in mind I have more recently found it just more annoying and to quote a friend of mine.. Cowardly. Kind of doubling that with races.

Interviewer: So if you could think specifically about gender and a system that is ideal for you - like, what does your ideal gender modeling in Final Fantasy look like?

Participant: Okay, so like - the first options are all the physical options. So, you build a character with a set number of limits and once you build that character, it goes "what are this character's pronouns?" Like flip it upside down and do it backwards and do it that way. And then not tie your voice acting at all to that, just tie the voice acting to the pronouns.

Interviewer: Right, so, physical appearance separate from the pronouns?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, those are all of my questions!

Participant #6 Interview

Interviewer: How many characters do you have?

Participant: I've just got the one.

Interviewer: So is there a reason that you stuck with just the one?

Participant: Well, there was - I was doing character creation and I managed to put some stuff together where I was like, "I think I like this character but I mean, the fact that you can kind of be every job and every class at will sort of eliminates the need for extra characters for me."

Interviewer: Does this character resemble anybody? Did you make specific aesthetic choices while you were creating the character?

Participant: It doesn't - It doesn't resemble anybody as far as I know. There's always that possibility that it's some sort of subconscious thing, but it was kind of - I put the character together when I was kind of figuring out gender stuff. I was like, "I can be this cute person and I'm just going to walk around being this cute person and it's going to be fun."

Interviewer: Were there any options - like, specific options that you can remember in the creation tool that drew you towards them? Like a specific race or a specific build or anything like that?

Participant: So, I made one of the.. Miquote? I've never pronounced it out loud so I don't know how it's pronounced but one of the cat people. It was always one of those, like - a lot of games it's - I think it was close enough to a human to be some sort of comfortable step into being some sort of non-human race while sort of being like identifiable, I guess. Also they had really fun haircuts, so.

Interviewer: That's important.

Participant: It is.

Interviewer: How would you describe your relationship with this character that you play?

Participant: I have - you now, I mean it's a lot of fond memories. I have getting into a free company that was a bunch of other trans people so, that's kind of - you know, this is my little avatar for interacting with these other cool people that I know on here. It kind of became this weird dual identity thing where sometimes your character can do this cool thing that you can't. Or because you have that little bit of anonymity, you can say that you think this person's cute or something like that. There's like this little barrier I guess between being directly judged for stuff.

Interviewer: Would you describe this character as having their own persona?

Participant: I don't think so. I think it was almost more of a way to explore some parts of my own persona that I tend to not highlight or push back for fear of social rejection and stuff like that.

Interviewer: So, have you ever written any fiction about your character or the world of Final Fantasy?

Participant: I haven't mostly because I feel like I'm just not a good writer. So, mostly I feel that would just lead to frustration for me.

Interviewer: How would you describe your engagement with Final Fantasy itself? Like, are you a dungeons and raids person? Are you part of a roleplaying community? Are you a story person?

Participant: I like the exploration aspect of it the most I think. Just kind of being able to not have any super hard restrictions. You know, you can go anywhere. If you want to spend the day hanging out with friends and going fishing on the beach, you can do that! Or um, you know, if you want to go to the casino and hang around and not actually lose any real money, you can do that. It's a bit of that and being able to design fun, fancy outfits and not have to spend thousands of dollars.

Interviewer: Have you ever used a Phial of Fantasia?

Participant: Yes. Two.

Interviewer: Cool! Can you talk about why - why you used them?

Participant: So, it was right after the latest expansion pack came out. Shadowbringers? I think it is? They introduced the Viera. Basically giant bunny people. In real life I'm tall and I was like, hey I can make my character tall, too! And have fun bunny ears! I did that but I had gotten so used to the way my character originally like and felt like I was... I don't know. Not cheating on, you know, the character or anything but it was strange so I brought her back to her original looks with a fun new hair cut.

Interviewer: If Phials of Fantasia were free do you think that you would use them more often?

Participant: Maybe so. Just to see how things looked on different races and stuff but I feel like I would probably go back to my original character eventually.

Interviewer: How frequently do you use the glamour system.

Participant: A lot! I've maxed out - I've filled up all the glamour plates and usually whenever I go into dungeons with friends - we'll do the roulette or whatever to get some extra experience and usually I make it a point to pop back into town and change outfits before we go into another dungeon just to see if whatever I pick matches up with the dungeon we're going to. Usually it doesn't but it's fun when it does.

Interviewer: [Laughing] That is fun! So, your motivation - like, can you talk about your motivation for changing outfits. Or, I guess, re-... This isn't a word but I'm going to say it - "reaesthetizing" another set of gear?

Participant: I feel like most of it is - there's just so much fun-looking clothing, I kind of hate to be locked into one thing for super long. I think the variety is fun and also I try to find what I think is almost the essence of certain like jobs or classes or something and making an outfit based around that. So, even from a distance you can tell, "oh this is the white mage or oh this is this, this is this." Sometimes I'll make it my goal to turn that on its head and it's like, "okay, my white mage looks like they got kicked out of Hot Topic for stealing things" or stuff like that.

Interviewer: So, now, moving into questions more about the creation tool itself. Did you feel limited in any way when you were originally making your character?

Participant: Yeah, it seems that everything in that game is pretty rigidly locked onto a gender binary. Whereas, like, you make a character and even some of the clothes you get, it's like only men can wear these clothes, only women can wear this. I know there's a limitation with programming it to look right on different models and all that. It was kind of frustrating because - there's the clothing part of it and then there's also - it seems like everybody's locked - you're only options are to make a skinny, pretty person. Like, that's pretty much it. You can't make anybody who's, you know, heavier or taller than average or shorter than average or you can't make a lady that has a beard or you can't make a guy who has boobs. Or anything like that. There's really no kind of in between. It's a hundred or nothing on the scale.

Interviewer: Was there anything that you particularly liked about the creation tool?

Participant: It seemed like there was a lot of, you know, coloration options for things. I liked all the different hair styles and the fact that you can put highlights and lowlights and all that sort of stuff and things like that. It seemed like it was easy to make a character that was aesthetically pleasing, I guess. Which is good if it's something you're going to look at for a couple hundred hours. But, you know, I feel like there could have been a little bit more granularity in some of it.

Interviewer: So, you did talk a bit about your feelings towards gender and gender declaration in the game. Have you noticed any gendered interactions that you've had with NPCs? How do you feel about certain races being gender locked?

Participant: Yeah, that part's not great. I've never seen the reasoning behind it if you're putting all this time and effort into the race of a game, let people make whatever gender presentation they want with it. I feel like maybe having some - If you picked male, maybe you can have a default starter thing and you can customize for there to make it look more traditionally feminine or anything like that would be good. I feel like locking things down to gender is just frustrating and kind of old fashioned. Like, a lot of the old games did that and I've never been a fan of it.

Interviewer: In an ideal what does gender modeling or gender representation look like to you?

Participant: I feel like in an ideal system that wouldn't even be - maybe not even a check box. Like you can have muscular or lean or you can have like a heavy set or lighter, you can have a tall or a short. But you really don't need to have like "this is a guy, we're going to refer this person by he and she" or this person by - who's going to call the main character "oh, I'm going to get into a fight with you and I'm going to call you a bitch because you picked a female character!" Like, I don't think that stuff's necessary. Maybe have a list of pronouns that somebody can pick from or even have a spot where they could pick other and put whatever. Whether you're being referred to in this tense or whatever so can - it'll still be accurate language-wise but it'll be more custom fit to what you want.

Interviewer: Yeah, so, those are my questions!

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