“A Checkbox on a Character Sheet”: Nonbinary Gender Representations in Video Games

Lauren Lacey

Abstract
Gender representation is an oft-discussed topic in game studies literature, but “gender representation” tends to mean “female representation”. Many discussions of gender in game studies lack the nuance of queer gender identities that lay beyond a binary notion of gender. This literature review seeks to analyze the state of nonbinary gender representation in video games, looking at both characters and avatar creation screens, to find scholarship about queer gender identities, as well as games that are gender-inclusive. Ultimately, the video game industry has a long way to go to break beyond the binary of gender stereotypes that it has become known for.

Keywords
queer studies, gender studies, gender representation, game studies, video games, nonbinary genders, LGBTQI representation
Transgender video game designer Anna Anthropy (she/her; 2013) writes that the current state of representation is such that a queer identity “is a checkbox on a character sheet, a Boolean, a binary bit, not an experience that greatly changes one’s life, identity, struggle” (para. 10). While video games are beginning to increase gender representation, there is a long way to go for meaningful queer gender representation in gaming. Many early video games had no concept of gender within them. The graphics simply were not good enough at the time to make a distinction (Ray, 2004). It was not until the release of Pac-Man in 1980 and Ms. Pac-Man in 1982 that problematic binary representations of gender in video games began to emerge (Ray, 2004). Since then, gender in video games has become a popular topic. Whether referring to the gamers, the designers, or the characters, issues of gender are at the forefront of many conversations about video games. However, many of these issues only look at the inclusion of binary cis-gender identities. In this paper, I seek to examine the current state of the representation of nonbinary gender identities in video games and the surrounding literature. Essentially, I am asking how representations of gender in video games can move beyond binary thinking and become more inclusive of all gender identities.

While the term “nonbinary,” and the academic discourse surrounding this identity are new, the concept of nonbinary genders is not a new phenomenon (McNabb, 2018). Although these identities have always existed around the globe, in the West, it was not until the 1990s that the co-founder of Transsexual Menace (a New York City transgender rights group), Riki Wilchins, first created the term “genderqueer” as a way of identifying anyone whose gender fell outside of the gender binary (McNabb, 2018). In the early 2010s, “nonbinary” became the preferred term, under the broader spectrum of transgender identities (McNabb, 2018). The term nonbinary has come to represent all gender identities where the person identifies as neither fully male nor female, acknowledging “gender as a complex constellation of infinite possibilities” (McNabb, 2018, p. 4). Nonbinary cannot be considered a “third gender” as it represents the fluidity of gender, recognizing gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. Nonbinary falls under the transgender umbrella; therefore, many people who are nonbinary, although not all, also consider themselves transgender. For this paper, I will be focusing specifically on nonbinary identities instead of the larger transgender community, as the issues of representation surrounding the nonbinary community are quite different than, for instance, the issues faced by trans men and women.

Representation in video games is still a relatively new subject within
game studies and is still often overlooked. Broadly speaking, scholarship has primarily focused on game structure and mechanics over narratology and characters (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). Despite the recent growth in scholarship surrounding gender representation, much of it continues to examine gender as a binary notion and tends not to consider any kind of non-cisgender representation. This is not entirely unfounded, as the representation of women in video games is lacking; video games still tend to be considered spaces of masculinity with little to no progressive representation (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). Media scholar Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin (she/her; 2017) notes that video games continue to “contribute to reproducing, reinforcing, and naturalizing pre-existing beliefs about men and women” (p. 90) through the often simplistic and stereotypical representations of gender found within them. One of the most cited works in this area is game designer Sheri Graner Ray’s (she/her; 2004) *Gender Inclusion in Game Design: Expanding the Market*, which offers a history of gender representation in video games. However, this book takes a completely binary approach to gender, with no acknowledgement of the existence of genders outside of the binary. Despite the fact that more games are allowing players to play as male or female characters, games featuring exclusively female characters are still in the minority, and games continue to be developed and marketed for men (Mejia & LeSavoy, 2018), demonstrating that there is still a need to make considerations for female representation alongside nonbinary representation.

Nonbinary representation in games sits at the intersection of gender representation and queer representation. Recently, more scholars have been looking into queer representation in video games. However, nonbinary and other queer gender identities remain less discussed in scholarship compared to queer sexualities (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Much of the scholarship in this area is being done by queer games scholars Adrienne Shaw (she/her) and Bo Ruberg (they/them), both of whom have written books about queer representation in video games and collaborated on *Queer Game Studies* (2017).

In a 2019 study titled “Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985-2005,” Shaw et al. looked at 162 video games to see how queer genders and sexualities have been portrayed. The study categorized character representation in two ways: explicit and implicit. Other studies have used this model as well, where explicit representation is queerness that is “clearly and easily read,” and implicit representation is considered to be “having signifiers of LGBTQ identities but not explicitly stated as such” (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3879). The problem with trying to count
queer character representation in video games is that the characters cannot self-identify the way people normally would on a census form (Shaw et al., 2019). Researchers often must rely on how the character is read and portrayed, looking to fan sites for confirmation. For example, Fang and Vanille in Final Fantasy XIII (Square Enix, 2010) are often read by fans as being in a sapphic relationship, but the characters’ queerness is never made explicit (Shaw, n.d.-e). Shaw et al. (2019) found that most of the LGBT content over the twenty years was found in adventure games or role-playing games. In terms of nonbinary representation, they noted that: “nonbinary and intersex characters remain relatively underrepresented, whereas gender nonconforming and transgender representation have generally increased over time. Gender and sex diversity, however, is radically less present than sexual diversity in games” (Shaw et al., 2019, p. 1556). However, the study only covered until 2005, with the release of the Nintendo Wii and the increase in casual gaming (Shaw et al., 2019), and in the years since, there has been more nonbinary representation.

In 2016, Shaw created the LGBT Video Game Archive. She notes that it is not so much an archive, but a “curated collection of information about LGBT and queerly read game content” (Shaw, n.d.-a). The archive categorizes games by their queer content in the following categories: actions, artifacts, characters, easter eggs, homophobia/transphobia, locations, mentions (where queer characters and communities are alluded to, but not actually part of the game), mods, narrative, relationships, and traits (Shaw, n.d.-a). The character section is then broken down by many different identities, including “non-binary or genderqueer”. This section currently lists 33 nonbinary characters in video games, with 20 of those characters being explicitly nonbinary (Shaw, n.d.-d). She also differentiates between nonbinary and agender identities, where agender is under the nonbinary umbrella denoting those who have no gender, rather than the broader notion of non-conformity to the gender binary. Most characters in this category are non-human (Shaw, n.d.-c). The final way the archive looks at nonbinary representation is through the action of “non-binary gender customization,” where players can change their avatar’s gender. The archive currently cites 11 games with this option (Shaw, n.d.-b).

Other sources have also been tracking nonbinary representation in video games. The Nonbinary Wiki, a site for all user-generated information regarding nonbinary gender identities, has a page specifically for nonbinary gender in fiction, which includes a subsection on video game characters (Nonbinary Wiki Contributors, 2022). Similar to the LGBT Video Game Archive, the wiki also tracks “video games with nonbinary player character options” (Non-
binary Wiki Contributors, 2021). They define this category in two ways: either players can select nonbinary as a gender, or they can create an avatar with “no reference to gender at all” (Nonbinary Wiki Contributors, 2021). Finally, McNabb’s Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources (2018) also contains an annotated bibliography with 20 games containing nonbinary representation.

As previously mentioned there are typically two main ways that nonbinary identities are embodied: player-created avatars and designer-created characters. Firstly, I will look at avatars, which video game scholar Harrison Gish (he/him; 2019) defines as “discernible, modifiable figures that players control” (p. 36). Avatars are not just the point of view players see from, but a “virtual projection” of the player in the game space (p. 36). Most games’ avatar customization relies on the gender binary and often conflates biological sex and gender identity (Shaw, 2014). However, there has been an increasing trend to move away from gender binaries in some avatar customizations. In games like Pokémon Go! (Niantic, 2016) and Animal Crossing: New Horizons (Nintendo EPD, 2020), players are asked to choose from two “styles” as opposed to genders. While this model still promotes binary thinking and aestheticizes gender, it is the beginning of a shift away from gendered language. Interestingly, New Horizons’ lack of gendered language only exists in the English North American version of the game, while international versions still ask characters for a binary gender (Shaw, n.d.-m).

Other simulation games allow for nonbinary representation in avatar customization with the option to choose the pronouns of the avatar. Dating simulation games such as Hustle Cat (Date Nighto, 2016) and Monster Prom (Beautiful Glitch, 2018), allow for the option to play using they/them pronouns (Shaw, n.d.-g, n.d.-k). Other games, such as Robots Need Love Too (Elephant Mouse LLC, 2015) allow for more neutral pronoun options including, they/them, zie/hir, ey/em, and xie/xem (Shaw, n.d.-f). Some games have removed the option of pronouns altogether. In 7th Dragon III Code: VFD (Imageepoch, 2016), avatars are all referred to by they/them pronouns, while voice and appearance are still customizable (Shaw, n.d.-i). The text-based game Creatures Such as We (Glasser, 2014) allows players to choose a gender identity from a list, which includes cisgender and transgender options, but never refers to the avatar by gendered pronouns, as it is entirely written from a second-person point of view (Shaw, n.d.-j).

The popular simulation game The Sims 4 (Maxis, 2014) allowed players to select gender-neutral pronouns for the first time in 2022 (Simpson, 2022).
The update had been long delayed due to the difficulty of translating nonbinary pronouns into languages that do not necessarily have similar pronouns (Simpson, 2022). This case is a large step forward for nonbinary representation in a game that is generally inclusive to the transgender community, allowing players many gender customization options such as clothing preference, voice, physical frame, and biological sex characteristics (Shaw, n.d.-h).

The issue with this form of representation is that it often does not allow for fluidity of gender expression. While there are inclusive choices of pronouns, players still must choose only one set of pronouns, which is often not changeable later in gameplay. More broadly, when it comes to issues of representation in avatars, Shaw notes that when video games allow for “optional representation… [it] places the burden of representation on the players themselves” (Shaw, 2014, p. 35). Essentially, these games are not fundamentally nonbinary games. Players have the option to completely avoid the nonbinary or queer aspects of these games, thus limiting the element of representation in the game. Other scholars have noted similar issues, where the gender “options exist… promising LGBTQI options but with little flexibility in [the] actual play” (Macklin, 2017, p. 250), where avatars are allowed to be nonbinary, but their choice does not truly affect gameplay. This issue is fundamental to nonbinary representation in video games. If nonbinary avatars behave and are interacted with in the same way that cisgender avatars do and are, is it truly a representation of the nonbinary experience? The final issue with this area of representation is the mechanics behind avatar customizations, where customization is depicted “as a series of yes-or-no choices. This arrangement replicates… the conservative belief that sexuality [and gender identity] is merely a choice” (Chang, 2017, p. 228). These forms of representation are meant to be inclusive, but the mechanics used to create these diverse gender options are exactly still that—options. Not fundamental ways of being or shifts in lived experience.

The other way that nonbinary genders are represented in video games is through character design. When discussing characters, I will be looking at both playable characters (PCs) and non-playable characters (NPCs). Characters can be read as nonbinary in two ways: explicitly, where the character states their gender identity or uses they/them pronouns, or implicitly, where, through the character’s actions and appearance, they can be read as existing outside of the gender binary, often through portrayals of androgyny. Queer and trans scholar Charlie McNabb (they/them; 2018) defines androgynous as “clothing, hair, and other style markers that are in-between or ambiguously gendered” (p. 241). Whether we realize it or not, “gender norms are embedded into video
games’ stories, designs, and codes” (Trépanier-Jobin, 2017, p. 90). When these gender norms are dismantled, we tend to view the character as androgynous, even if the character does not explicitly identify as nonbinary. Not all nonbinary people adopt androgynous style markers, but in the case of video games, the ambiguity of androgyny can be read as a kind of nonbinary identity. Meghan Blythe Adams (they/them; 2018), a scholar who looks at androgyny in media, notes that androgynous heroes in video games seem to “offer models of heroism that are not rooted in a static gender binary” (p. 148). For example, Link in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo, 2017) can pass as a woman in gameplay due to the lack of masculine signifiers in his character design, which seem to represent a more nonbinary approach to gender (Adams, 2018). Other examples of heroic androgyny can be found in the Final Fantasy series, with Cloud Strife in Final Fantasy VII (Square, 1997) and Lightning in Final Fantasy XIII (Square Enix, 2010) both often being read as androgynous. However, Adams (2018) looks at how these portrayals of androgyny often create a “false sense of neutrality” where the androgynous character designs prioritize “white, thin, able-bodied masculinity as the seemingly ‘neutral’” (p. 148).

Adams (2018) further points out the way that androgynous and nonbinary representations tend toward depictions of villains in video games, where characters are “presented as variously humorous, pitiable, or monstrous, and often all three” (p. 147). Although not a villain, Quina Quen in Final Fantasy IX (Square, 2000), who uses both he/him and she/her pronouns and appears as genderless, is portrayed as comic relief throughout the game (Shaw, n.d.-l). These portrayals of villains “often simultaneously trade on stereotypes about transgender women and gay men: the gender-fluid villain is often thought to be attempting to masquerade as a woman” (Adams, 2018, p. 150). These androgynous or gender-nonconforming people presented as villain stereotypes are found throughout media and can be seen in characters like Ursula from Disney’s The Little Mermaid (1989) who is based on a drag queen (Putnam, 2015). In video games, this trope can be seen notably in villains like Birdo in Super Mario Bros. 2 (Nintendo R&D4, 1988), who appears initially as a villain “who thinks he is a girl,” as well as Sander Cohen from BioShock (2K Games, 2007), who is portrayed as implicitly queer and gender nonconforming as a foil to the protagonist (Adams, 2018; Chang, 2017; Shaw, n.d.-n). Flea, from Chrono Trigger (Square, 1995), is another example of a nonbinary character as a villain. However, Flea has become something of a positive symbol for the transgender community due to their assertion that “male…female…what does it matter? Power is beautiful, and I’ve got the power!” (Shaw & Friesem, 2016,
This look at androgyny in video games shows that not all representation of nonbinary identities is necessarily “good.” Shaw (2014) cautions against framing representation on a “good” versus “bad” binary, stating that “judgments about what counts as a ‘positive’ or a ‘negative’ representation are political questions and must be interrogated as such” (p. 20). Often, when we talk about “good” and “bad” representation, we are referring to whether the representation propagates stereotypes. In the examples above, they would be framed as “negative” representations due to the stereotypes they portray: androgyny and masculinity as white and neutral, and gender nonconformity as villainy. However, Shaw (2014) further states that “to say that a given portrayal offers a negative representation of a group implies both that the group is definable and that the group exists in the world in a singular way that is misrecognized” (p. 20). Nonbinary by definition is an umbrella term that represents a spectrum of identities that cannot be categorized in any “singular way” (McNabb, 2018; Shaw, 2014). Thus, I will endeavour not to speak about representation as a “good” versus “bad” binary, but as a spectrum, where some representations are more effective and productive than others.

One effective example of progressive nonbinary representation in video games is the work of Dietrich “Squinky” Squinkifer (they/them). They are a nonbinary, asexual, person of colour, and an independent game designer who works out of Montreal, Canada (Ruberg, 2020). They are most known for their point-and-click PC/Mac games *Dominique Pamplemousse in “It’s All Over Once the Fat Lady Sings!”* and its sequel: *Dominique Pamplemousse & Dominique Pamplemousse in “Combinatorial Explosion!”* (Squinkifer Productions, 2014; 2017). These games are black-and-white, stop-motion, claymation, and musical mysteries, starring the nonbinary detective, Dominique Pamplemousse. While the game is ostensibly a detective story and murder mystery, due to its nonbinary protagonist, it deals with a plethora of gender issues. While Dominique is most worried about solving the case, the cast of characters surrounding them are more concerned with figuring out their gender identity and which pronouns to use to refer to Dominique (Chambers, 2014). One example of these exchanges is:

“I don’t mean to be rude,” says one, “but what are you?”
“I’m a private detective,” Dominique says with matter-of-fact confidence.
“No, are you a boy or a girl?” (Squinkifer Productions, 2014)

These moments highlight two key issues of nonbinary representation: the el-
ement of how often this type of questioning happens for nonbinary people, while simultaneously showing the ridiculousness of the question. There has been a murder, and the characters are more concerned with Dominique’s gender. It is important to note that Dominique never questions their gender; they know who they are, and it is simply everyone else who is confused. This confusion occasionally “acts as a game mechanic, allowing Dominique to pass for male or female as the situation requires” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 217). Part of what makes Dominique Pamplemousse an interesting example of nonbinary representation in video games is that it covers representation at three different levels: a nonbinary designer, an explicitly nonbinary character, and gameplay that is specific to the nonbinary lived experience.

While game designers and scholars are still in the process of addressing the issues of female representation in video games, it is important to remember that these issues of gender representation are based on a fundamentally binary understanding of gender that is not inclusive to the queer community. While queer scholars are looking at issues of heteronormativity and queer sexualities in video games, the ‘T’ aspect of LGBT is frequently forgotten. Nonbinary representation in video games is important due to the potential for representation to “shape social reality” (Shaw, 2014, p. 39). Through increased representations of nonbinary identities, hopefully, more cis-gendered people can become accustomed to interacting with nonbinary people. Over time, people will become more familiar with using neutral pronouns and having characters with those pronouns in media representation. Further, the benefits are not just for cis-gendered people, but for nonbinary people as well. Seeing characters who identify explicitly as nonbinary “provides evidence of what could be and who can be possible” (Shaw, 2014, p. 41). For queer people, representation is often how we come to identify our queerness. Identification with characters and labels is often how we come to understand ourselves because it “makes certain identities possible, plausible, and livable” (Shaw, 2014, p. 67).

Ultimately, nonbinary representation can show that these identities have always existed. It is only now beginning to be more widely discussed because there is a word for it and being “out” is generally more accepted. Ideally, there will eventually be enough nonbinary representation in video games to begin to look at intersectionality, more nuanced characters, and who is doing the representation—be it the designers, the actors doing motion capture, or the voice actors. Representation does matter, and it is time for the video game industry to do better.
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About the author

Lauren Lacey, Master of Information & Master of Museum Studies Candidate

University of Toronto

Lauren Lacey is a third-year student in the Combined Degree Program at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. Their work spans many topics, but a broad research interest is to look at the intersections of libraries and museums and the educational programs enacted by differing institutions. They are interested in how education can go beyond the classroom into using primary sources found in GLAM sector institutions. They are currently working as a Graduate Student Library Assistant at the University of Toronto Libraries, where they have begun teaching academic sessions on information literacy. Their education background is in English Literature and Performance Studies, specifically looking at teaching and education as a performance.

Email: lauren.lacey@mail.utoronto.ca