

IMPOSSIBLE IDENTITIES: THE LIMITATIONS OF CHARACTER CREATION SYSTEMS

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CHARACTER CREATION SYSTEMS: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

- Diversity of pre-designed characters allows for **identification** and **empathy**, as well as more interesting and nuanced **narratives**
- Character creation allows for 'projection'
 - Rather than 'identifying' with the personality, values, and choices of a character, character creation allows a player to 'project' their own onto a blank slate

(Papale 2014)

- Blank-slate player-characters claim to grant the player 'freedom'; however, this is still an environment controlled by the choices of the designers

CHARACTER CREATION SYSTEMS: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

- It is important for developers to understand what they should include within a 'good' character creation system
- However, these systems are not the **best** and definitely not the **only** way to incorporate diverse representation into games (DePass 2017)
- When discussing representation, it is important to consider the difference between 'pluralism' and diversity (i.e. repeating what users already know / see vs. exposing audiences to diversity) (Shaw 2010)

CHARACTER CREATION AND DIVERSITY

PROS AND CONS

Pros:

- Allows players to participate in self-guided experimentation regarding their identities

Cons:

- Players often recreate familiar characters, rather than exposing themselves to unique perspectives
- Game systems respond to characters in the 'default' way, regardless of initial choices made by the player
- Conscious or unconscious restrictions by the developer make some players feel unwelcome

CHARACTER CREATION AND DIVERSITY THEN WHY ARE WE HERE?

Character creation systems might not be the best approach to *diversity* but that's not all they're used for!

- Games are going to continue incorporating character creation systems
- Users are going to continue enjoying customisation mechanics

So...

What do users want in a character creation system?



REPRESENTATION SURVEYS: 2016

2016:

- 158 participants
- 2 weeks
- 15 questions
 - Qualitative
 - Broad
 - Foundational

2016 character creation questions:

- Which game has your favourite character creation screen/system, and why?
- Which game has your least favourite character creation screen/system, and why?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In the 2016 survey, participants prioritised character creation systems that were **most capable of creating a character they identified with**.

Many indicated a sense of shame around their preferences, saying things like 'Weirdly' or 'Strangely enough'.

Games that imposed limitations and restrictions on identifiers were criticised, particularly in terms of gender and body type.

Interfaces that asked players for their preferred pronouns rather than making assumptions based on gender choice were praised.

The Sims 4's updated character creation system was favoured by the most respondents (17%).



REPRESENTATION SURVEYS: 2016 AND 2017

2016:

- 158 participants
- 2 weeks
- 15 questions
 - Qualitative
 - Broad
 - Foundational

2017:

- 6,010 participants
- 1 week
- 35 questions
 - Qualitative and quantitative
 - More specific
 - Built upon first survey, but still foundational

2016 character creation questions:

- Which game has your favourite character creation screen/system, and why?
- Which game has your least favourite character creation screen/system, and why?

2017 character creation questions:

- What details would make you love a game's character creation screen / system? Why?
- What is an example of a character creation screen / system that you love? Why?
- What details would make you dislike a game's character creation screen / system? Why?
- What is an example of a character creation screen / system that you dislike? Why?

How important do you consider... (scale of 0-3)

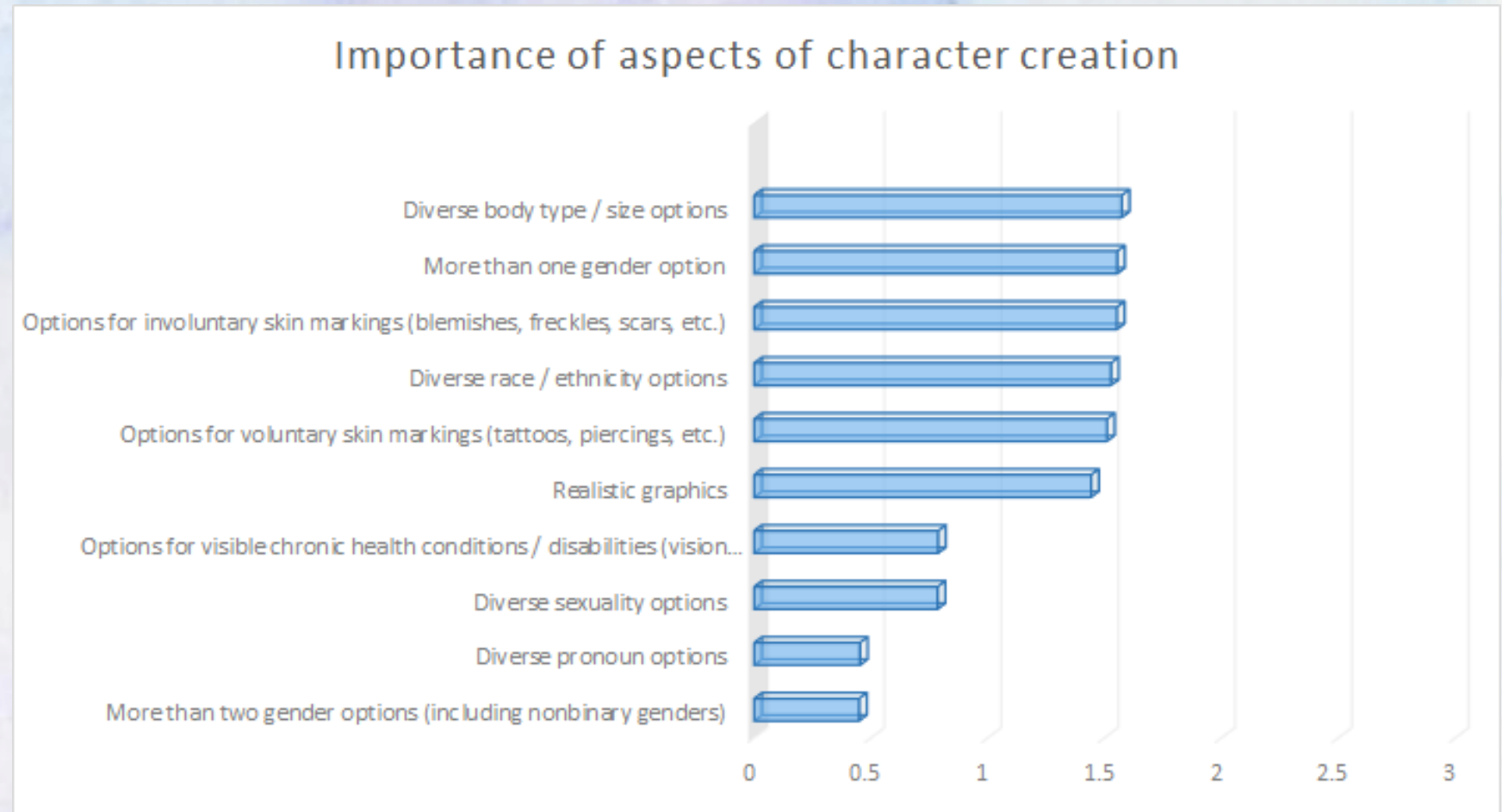
- Diverse sexuality options
- More than one gender option
- More than two gender options (including nonbinary genders)
- Diverse pronoun options
- Diverse race / ethnicity options
- Diverse body type / size options
- Options for involuntary skin markings (blemishes, freckles, scars, etc.)
- Options for voluntary skin markings (tattoos, piercings, etc.)
- Options for visible chronic health conditions / disabilities (vision impairment, loss of limb, wheelchair use, etc.)
- Realistic graphics

- Do you consider it important to be able to play as a character similar to yourself (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, body type, etc.) in games that have character creation screens / systems? Why / why not?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Participants in the 2017 survey prioritised **diverse body types** and having **more than one gender option**.

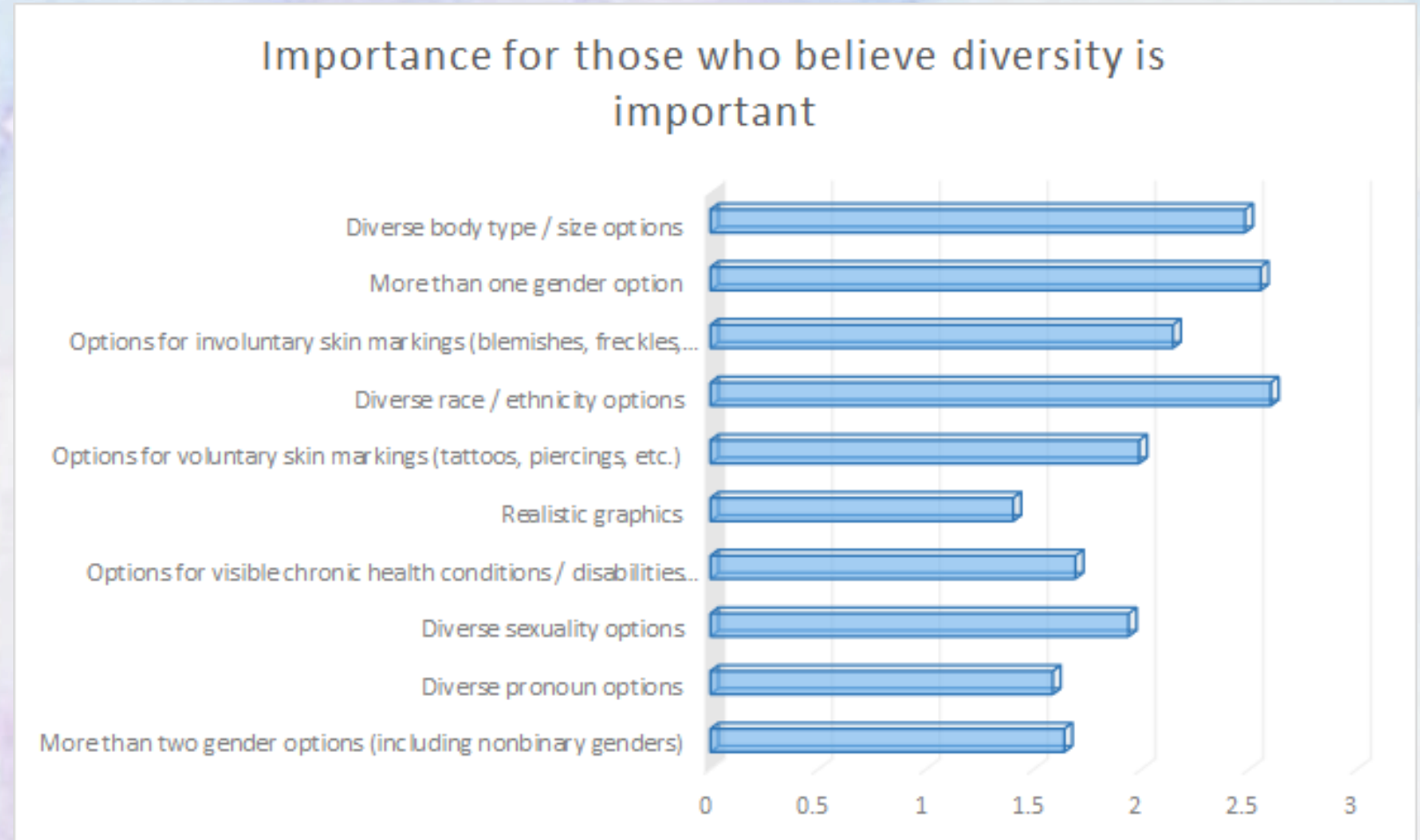
Participants cared least about **queer representation** (diverse genders, pronouns, and sexuality).



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Looking purely at those who believe **diversity is important**, we see less variance across the categories.

The lowest priority for these participants is **realistic graphics**.



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Importance	MoreThanTwoGenders	2278.826	1	2278.826	5201.086	.000	.507
	DiversePronounOptions	2045.296	1	2045.296	4265.339	.000	.457
	DiverseSexualityOptions	2195.074	1	2195.074	2954.894	.000	.369
	ChronicHealthDisability	1371.047	1	1371.047	1744.664	.000	.256
	RealisticGraphics	3.321	1	3.321	2.638	.104	.001
	VoluntarySkinMarkings	405.502	1	405.502	343.538	.000	.064
	DiverseRaceOptions	1980.204	1	1980.204	1865.790	.000	.269
	InvoluntarySkinMarkings	608.673	1	608.673	521.476	.000	.093
	MoreThanOneGender	1706.187	1	1706.187	1452.046	.000	.223
	DiverseBodyTypes	1398.112	1	1398.112	1274.050	.000	.201

A MANOVA was conducted to compare the ratings of those who think diversity is important with those who don't. The MANOVA was significant:

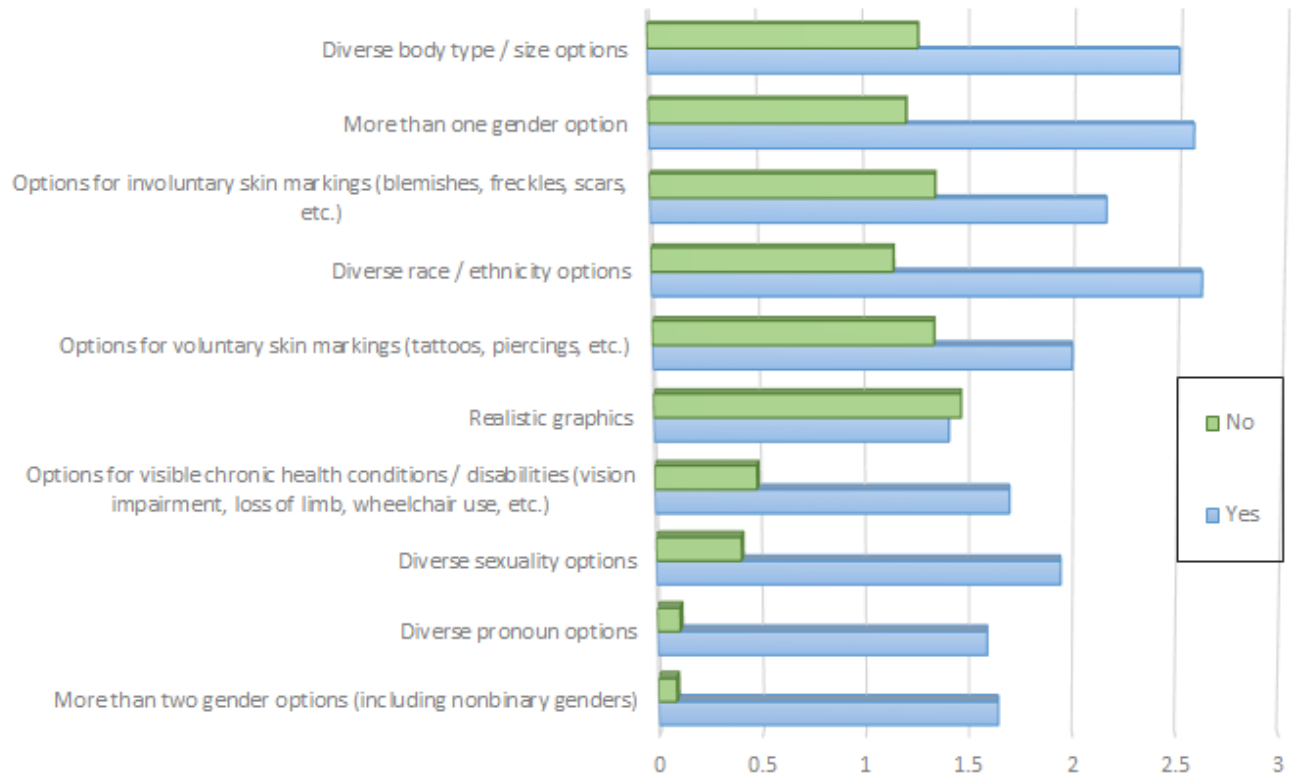
$F(10, 5052) = 629.40, p < .001, \text{partial eta-squared} = .555$

Follow-up analyses showed significant differences between all variables except the 'realistic graphics' category, in which ratings of importance didn't differ between the two groups overall.

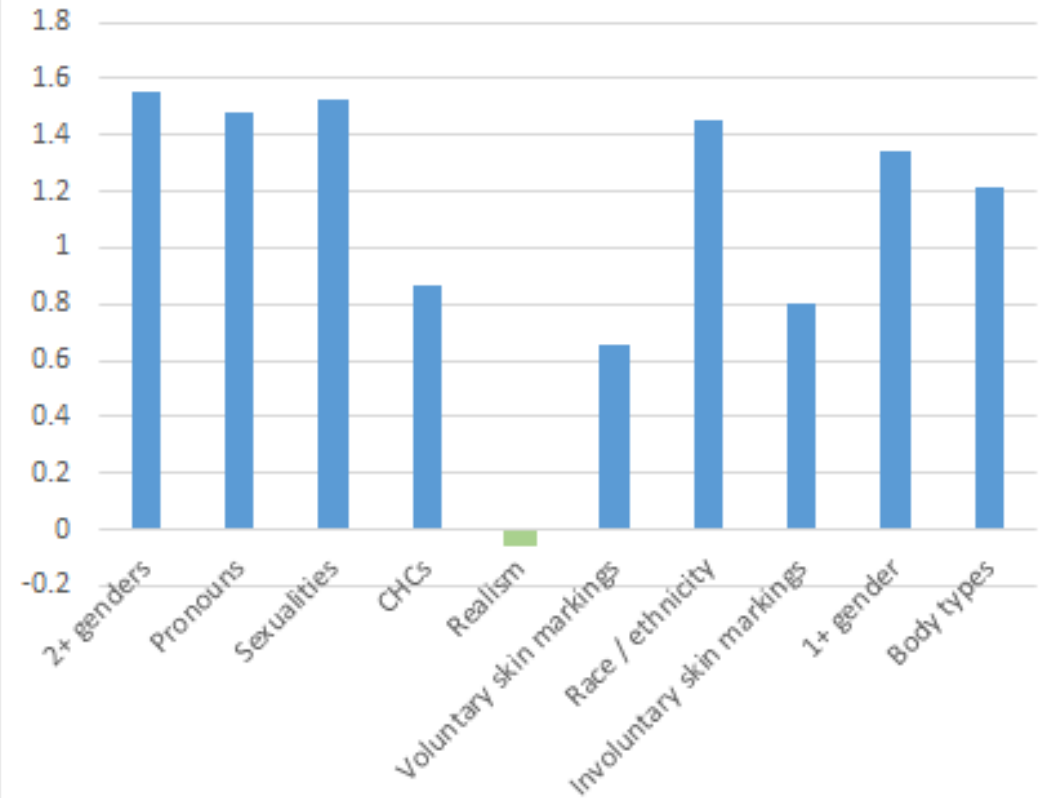
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In other words...

Importance of aspects of character creation



Differences

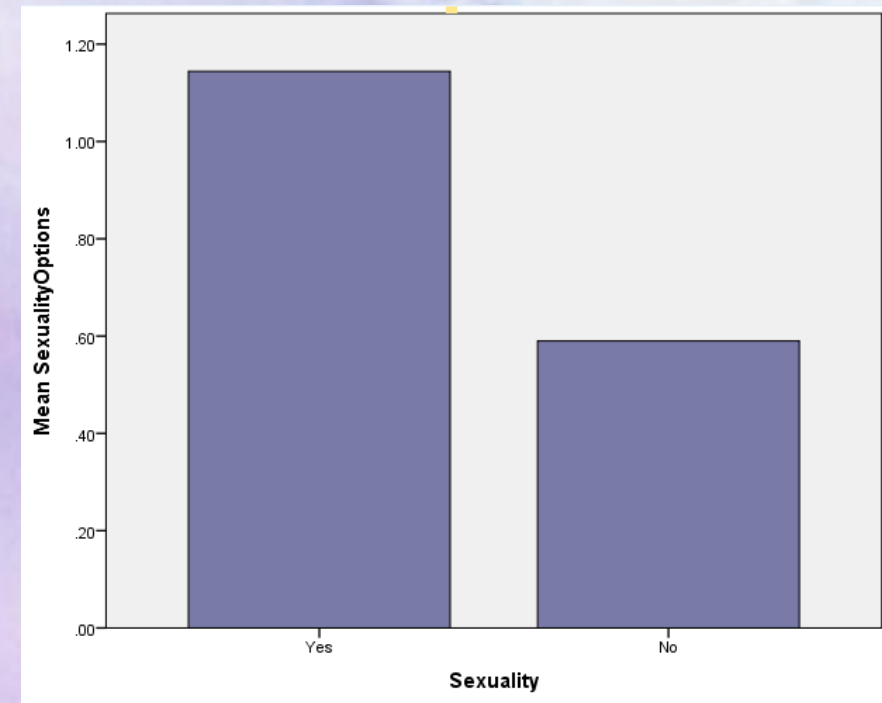


PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
SexualityOptions	Equal variances assumed	555.456	.000	19.202	5690	.000	.55442	.02887	.49782	.61102
	Equal variances not assumed			17.662	3243.161	.000	.55442	.03139	.49287	.61597

An independent samples t-test was performed to compare the ratings of the importance of representations of different sexualities between those who identified as straight ($M = .60, SD = .768$), and those who identified as a sexuality other than straight ($M = 1.16, SD = 1.104$). Due to the high amount of variance in the 'straight' category, Welch's t test was used for comparison. The t test was significant, $t(3243.16) = 555.46, p = <.001$, two-tailed.

Having diverse sexuality options was therefore shown to be rated significantly more important by those who identified as a sexuality other than straight.



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

A between-groups ANOVA was performed to compare ratings of the importance of diverse gender options between those who identify as cisgender, and those who identify as gender-diverse.

Preferences analysed:

- More than one gender option
- More than two gender options (including nonbinary genders)
- Diverse pronoun options

Significant differences were found on all three 'gender' variables between the two groups, to a level of $p < .001$

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
GenderOptions1	Between Groups	84.585	1	84.585	57.462	.000
	Within Groups	8375.749	5690	1.472		
	Total	8460.334	5691			
GenderOptions2	Between Groups	410.872	1	410.872	537.457	.000
	Within Groups	4349.858	5690	.764		
	Total	4760.730	5691			
DiversePronouns	Between Groups	362.815	1	362.815	459.797	.000
	Within Groups	4489.847	5690	.789		
	Total	4852.663	5691			

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary analysis of survey results indicates that:

- Providing users with diversity of options in character creation systems is valued
- Users primarily care about diversity of body type and gender
- Users who are attracted to diverse games would also like to see diversity in other tested categories
- Users enjoy being able to create representations of themselves, or to see the potential for creating these representations

FURTHER RESEARCH

Further analysis of these survey results:

- Greater exploration of correlations between responses
- Deeper analysis of qualitative responses in conjunction with quantitative analysis

Further research into this area:

- Establishing a better understanding of how people use character creation systems
 - Impact on their enjoyment and engagement
 - Impact on their identity
- Providing information about how character creation systems can be better used in conjunction with better methods of diversifying representation in games

QUESTIONS?

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