



Are you a boy?
Or are you a girl?

Are You a Boy? Or Are You a Girl?

For those who want to play with gender, games are sometimes a safer setting in which to experiment and discover.

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This is [Controller](#), a column by Chris Karnadi on looking at the world and its discontents through the lens of video games.

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When I painted my nails for the first time, I was mistaken for a woman at least twice.

As I waited for the train to the airport and held my tumbler of tea, my charcoal-gray nails poked out of my sweater's sleeves. Someone walked up to me, asked a question, and misgendered me—then realized they had misgendered me and scurried away in embarrassment.

There can be such danger and pain in misgendering. But in this moment and context, under no threat and with the privilege of being a cis man, I was amused. In fact, it was pleasant to be mistaken for a woman. After the initial blush of my cheeks subsided, I wondered if I was pretty. When I told my partner about the exchange, we chuckled together, and they assured me I was.

I have been mistaken for a woman several times since growing out my hair, usually from behind and usually in the dark of a bar. My long bob and relatively slight frame can be confusing for some. But this was the first time it happened during the day and from the front.

My partner had just bought their first suit and was planning to wear it for the first time to a wedding. We expected it would be stiff in a way that you might expect from a socially connected DC event—imagine a lot of white people sipping Aperol spritzes.

Their colleagues and advisors would also be in attendance, and they were nervous about wearing the suit. As an act of solidarity, I offered to mix up my own gender expression and asked them to paint my nails. They brought a collection of nail polish to the wedding weekend—for me, not for them. It was a small decision that became monumental for us, as we figured out how to support one another in a queer relationship. All the same, their leap into dressing “boyish,” especially in a personal-professional setting, was by no means matched by my minor experiment with nail polish.

At the wedding itself, government officials and university professors milled about as I sipped a spritz with my nails painted. The glossy varnish flashed every time I shook another hand. Though small, my nails felt like beacons.

Before the wedding, in the Airbnb, painting my nails made me notice them in a way that I hadn’t before. I suddenly noticed their size. I originally painted all ten of my nails, but I grew self-conscious about the size of my thumbnails. I hadn’t noticed before it was painted, but my thumbnail is the size of a nickel, very much taking after my father; he’s the only person I know with thumbs bigger than mine.

Of course, painting one’s nails isn’t, as an act, inherently feminine; I’ve just been mostly socialized to think so. I didn’t expect many people to notice, let alone assume based on my painted nails that I was a woman. Though the point of painting my nails was for my partner, I learned it was also for me.

Seeing the flash of warm gray on my nails and caring for their beauty attuned me to my hands in a way that I hadn’t felt before. Embracing something that wasn’t made available to me as a boy was an awakening. A current of pleasure shot through my brain in a different way that demanded attention. What did the electric enjoyment of painting my nails mean?

I’ve long had an attraction to being feminine, and one of the first places I had the freedom to explore that urge was in video games. As a child, I often chose a female avatar when there was an option, but not without some hesitation. The first time I chose to play as a girl was in *Pokémon Crystal*. I clutched my Game Boy Color close to myself as my 8-bit character named Kris explored the Johto region. Considering my own first name, I decided I was certainly more of a Kris than an Ethan, the default male character’s name in English. (In fact, in the original Japanese, the default name, クリス or Kurisu, is the same for the boy and girl avatar.)

Pokémon Crystal was the first installment in the Pokémon series to let players choose their gender at the beginning of the game. The aesthetic difference was minor; the female protagonist only has a couple pixels of pigtails versus the male protagonist’s backward cap. But presenting players with the choice was, at the time, groundbreaking. Professor Oak, who sets you on your journey to catch all (at the time) 251 Pokémon and to become the undisputed best trainer in your region, asks you the question: “Are you a boy? Or are you a girl?”

This question became an iconic moment in gaming culture and has been fodder for many memes since. It’s simultaneously archaic and accidentally progressive. Forcing players to choose their gender at the beginning of the game reveals both an arbitrary binary and the default male perspective of the previous games—and most games still. But the choice also hints at the malleability of one’s gender expression.

For this game, do you want a boy avatar? Or a girl avatar? The answer is really up to you. Romp around Johto as whoever you want.

The other game in which I chose to play as a woman was *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3*. It was also the first in its series to allow players to choose a female avatar in its Create-a-Skater feature. When I chose to play as a female skater in *Pro Skater 3*, this choice became harder to hide. The TV attached to the PlayStation 2 sat front and center in our family room and was in plain view from the kitchen. Though my parents generally didn't pay attention when I played games, I still made my skater a woman furtively, afraid of my parents' questions or discipline if they caught me.

Choosing a female avatar for myself was like spreading lotion on parched skin. I felt a rush of awareness and excitement. The options for clothing and hairstyles were more fun with a female avatar, since they seemed to have more detail than the stock crew cuts for males, which looked like mops. The male avatars seemed blocky and bland in comparison to the female avatars. In *Pro Skater 3*, the female clothing options are designed to reveal skin and cleavage, while the male clothing options are mostly just an assortment of baggy '90s cargo shorts and graphic tees.

Then there's Private Carrera. She's an unlockable character, clearly designed for teen boys, dressed in an unbuttoned shirt with a pink bra peeking through and a skirt. I'm really not sure how someone skates in a pencil skirt. The character's bio in the previous game, *Pro Skater 2*, said, "If it's hard . . . like skateboarding . . . she's on it." Her special moves included a "Ho Ho Handplant" and the "Fifty-5 Ho Slide" grind.

Though the game's sexist portrayal of skin was what first drew me in—I was, after all, an eleven-year-old boy—the pleasure of playing the game with a female avatar gave me a subtle satisfaction that I didn't understand at the time. I thought little of the small spark that happened in middle school. In my mind, I reasoned that the spark was only there to affirm my attraction to women. Ultimately, I enjoyed the game first and analyzed my gender choices later.

Friends of mine told me that games have been a place to discover more of their gender expressions. One friend first found herself allergic to hyperfemininity and more inclined toward tomboyish expression in Mario games. She avoided characters like Peach and preferred characters like Toad or Yoshi. Another friend experimented with appearing more masc or femme through the proxies of video game characters and was inspired to chop off her own hair when she enjoyed a shorter cut on her avatar in *Stardew Valley*.

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I have loved the shape of dresses for as long as I can remember, but I've also been afraid of wearing them myself.

The first time I put on a dress, I was terrified. I did so in secret, silently sneaking into my sister's room after she left for college and swiftly trying on a light-blue shirred dress hidden in her closet. The soft cotton enveloped my skinny body for a brief moment before I just as quickly took it off. I hurried back to my room and pushed away the shock of how tantalizing the act felt, unwilling to ask what my enjoyment said about me.

I grew up in a conservative Christian environment wherein sex was a secret. I never talked to my parents about my early crushes or about the bullying that I experienced as an Asian American boy. I was often made fun of for being small and girlish, for the small size of my wrists and feet. In my teenage years, I was a homophobic evangelical Christian, but I hated masculinity because I didn't fit into its mold as an Asian American man. Over time, I began to unlearn my homophobia; when my best friend came out to me, he helped me understand a broader spectrum of masculinity. And dating my first out queer partner has helped me better understand my attraction to femininity—in them, and in me.

Sexuality and gender were things that I explored alone in shame as a young teen. I never entertained the possibility that I enjoyed being feminine because there was no room in my imagination to do so. But video games were my playgrounds. They provided choices that could help me discover that part of myself before I understood it was there.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons, the 2020 installment of the role-playing series that focuses on building community and making friends with animals, removed language about players choosing a gender and instead presented a choice between two styles, which can be toggled at any point while playing. All clothing can be worn by all players, from wizard capes to maid dresses (the sexism didn't magically disappear from the game).

Though I've occasionally worn a dress in my own home, wearing one outside pre-pandemic felt well beyond my reach. Donning a floral muumuu in *New Horizons* and visiting a friend's island this past year, however, was much easier. The ease in which I could try and buy different clothes in *New Horizons* encouraged me to keep exploring.

"Drag is its own world of experience, a theater of being female more than a reality," Alexander Chee writes in his essay "Girl." Hearing Chee's articulation of drag, of playing as and feeling like a pretty woman, pushed me to measure my own attraction to being feminine. "It isn't like being trans, either. It isn't, the more I think about it, like anything except what it is: costumes, illusion, a spell you cast on others and on yourself."

In some ways, choosing to play as female in video games is a type of digital drag. I can move in the costume of a character and see how she fits. Playing dress-up in games has helped me see more of myself when I'm nervous about playing with gender in public with more than just nail polish. Even writing this essay racked my nerves, thinking about how my baby thoughts and experiments with gender would be published out in the open.

The real world can be dangerous for those who want to play with gender. Games are sometimes a safer setting in which to experiment and discover. Gender itself is playful, inviting us to experiment with and enjoy expression.

While working on edits for this essay, I woke up in the middle of the night and decided to wear a dress outside. Invited to a Pride event with my partner, I painted my nails again—this time an iridescent toxic green—wore lipstick, and donned a dress borrowed from my partner. The navy blue high-collar Kaarem dress accentuated my neck and showed off my broad shoulders. The crepe polyester fit my body perfectly, and I strode into the party and danced how I always do, feeling more beautiful than I ever have before.