

ERIC: You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

In my last episode, I explored role playing video games, and how the choices you make as a character can reveal things about yourself. But there's another aspect of video games that I hadn't thought about. In some video games, you can also choose what type of character you can play. And for some players that's just a lark where they to be someone other than themselves. But for some people, playing with a video game avatar that doesn't look like how you look at the moment, can be really significant.

Jaye McAuliffe is a public radio reporter in Arizona, and she has a podcast called *We Might Ignite*, which tells the stories of women, non-binary people and trans men. And she pitched us this really interesting premise for an episode because her journey in becoming transgender began with video games. I found her story really fascinating, and she's going to be our guide through this episode. Hey, Jaye!

JAYE: Hey, Eric.

ERIC: So let's go back to the beginning, when did this start for you?

JAYE: It's actually hard for me to determine, what came first? Was I questioning my gender and starting to play female characters? To clarify, I'm a trans woman. Sometimes it's hard to tell a person's gender based on their voice. When I was very young, i didn't have any other frame of reference, I always played male characters, and there are so many games where you don't have a choice, by default you are a male character. But then something clicked and I started playing female characters when I could, and it really got going with *The Sims*. I played a ton of *The Sims 3* and *Sims 4*.

CLIP: SIMS MUSIC

So if you haven't played *The Sims*, basically ou can create any sort of person – avatar – you can create a whole family, and you can run them through a bunch of possible scenareos for living life. It's like a realistic fiction game with a bunch of goofiness added on.

ERIC: Was there an aha moment when you thought, huh, I can do this? Or when you first created a female avatar for yourself in The Sims, what were you thinking at that moment?

JAYE: Looking back now, it's hard to remember what I was thinking at that moment but it's kind of weird, the character I ended up creating, one of my first avatars, at that time I didn't look how I look now, I was not presenting as a woman in any way, I didn't know if that's what I wanted to but I created what I thought could be the more feminine version of myself, the female version of me. I was looking back through those characters, and it's a little weird how much they look like me now. You can switch the character's gender – added slightly longer hair – and whoa! There I am!

ERIC: That's so interesting because – I mean, probably you can tell for anyone listening to this podcast for the last couple years, I'm a straight cis guy, and I've played female characters in video games and in my episode on larping I talked about playing female characters in larps, but it never occurred to me that someone who is trans that this could be a really formative experience for them. Do you know how common an experience this is?

JAYE: I came to this story because this was something I've heard a lot of my trans friends talk about or mention like, that oh, they played video games and realized through video games and changing their gender that oh – this might be a real thing. So I decided to talk with an expert named Bonnie Ruberg.

BONNIE: I am Bonnie Ruberg. I go by Bo. I am a professor at UC Irvine in the department of informatics, and my specialty is queerness and videogames...

JAYE: Bo literally wrote the book on this, it's coming out in a few months, it's called "Video Games Have Always Been Queer."

BONNIE: Videogames can be a way to try out different identities, to explore your own identity, to have a space where you can play with identity, where you know it's not the same as being in the world outside the game, that you can try different things. And one of the things that's unique about video games is they're not just about images, they're about the interactions and the experiences you have.

ERIC: So did that ring true for you?

JAYE: Yeah definitely So there's this game I played called Life is Strange where – you don't get to choose a character, you play as this girl, Max Caulfield. She's a high school senior and you play through a week in her life.

ERIC: And it's very much along the lines of the games I talked about in my last episode, the choose your own adventure type role playing games.

JAYE: Yeah, it's very Telltale-esque. She gets this power in the game though to rewind time.

CLIP: LIFE IS STRANGE

JAYE: Something really spoke to me because we all have that one moment of what if I could go back to that one moment and change it? What would happen then? And for me I started thinking what if I could go back for a moment and have the clarity and language to describe how I felt in high school or earlier? What if I had been able to transition earlier?

ERIC: Yeah, because I think with video games, when you're playing a character you will often have a much stronger identification with the character than if you were watching a movie or reading a book. And you'll refer to the character as I – like, I was just doing this. So it sounds like even before you can change your gender in a game like The Sims, you can have an experience with a video game that resonates with you in a different way.

JAYE: Absolutely so this feeling with Max Caulfield with Life is Strange of oh – I was just in high school, and I was seen as a girl, and no one thinks twice in the game because that's how the game is written, that was an amazing experience, so in real life, we can't rewind time but I do think video games can give transgender people and people who weren't privileged to have those experiences, to have those experiences. It can just be playing a character that really, really identify with – even if it's really fantastical and bizarre. I mean that happened to Bo.

BONNIE: For me personally as a queer person and a non-binary person I am most drawn to games that are not representational. So one of my favorite games is Octo-Dad, which is a game about being an octopus who is trying to pass as a human dad. And if you think about it, it's really about gender and sexuality and

normativity because he's just trying to be a normal butch white suburban dad but he's trying to control this unruly octopus body. So it's those experiences that connect the most with me.

CLIP: OCTO-DAD

ERIC: That game is so funny. But aren't there video games where you can go through the whole game as a male or a female version of the main character -- and it's basically the same game either way?

JAYE: Yeah. So my friend Brynmore Ruiz played Dragon Age a lot, and it's a game just like that. You can choose your characters gender, and that does not affect the choices you make in the game. I mean, that does affect the romance options because not every character is straight, but the overarching big plot of saving the world, doesn't change at all.

And here is my friend Brynmore:

BRYNMORE: Dragon Age was one of the major games for me just because it gave me that opportunity to explore the kind of decisions I could make not only as a person but in terms of as the person I'm presenting of whether gender identity or – since it's Dragon Age so it's fantasy so any of the races or appearances – all of that was up to me and it was freeing in a way I don't think I would've originally anticipated because suddenly it was on on this day I'm feeling this person or I'm feeling more feminine on this day so I can present it as a more fantasy version of myself. For once it just kind of felt like I could do or be whoever I wanted without that stigma of, I have to fit into a specific box. So yeah, it was my first taste of freedom essentially.

ERIC: I know for this piece, you talked with a bunch of friends. Were all their experiences simliar to the one you had with The Sims?

JAYE: More of less. The big thing that a video game can do is customize your character. And whether they mean to or not, these games have made gender tranistions a big part of that process. Like there's this game, Game Saints Row 4, which is a supernatural spy thriller with an alien invasion thrown in there, and the main character is a brillaint street thug. And my friend Julie Jaless used to love that game.

CLIP: SAINTS ROW

JULIE: In Saints Row, you play the leader of the third street saints. And you generally play an asshole who's an idiot regardless of gender, so hashtag equality. There's random places throughout the game that you can get digital plastic surgery where you can recustomize your face. It's also the only place you can get a haircut, oddly enough. And you can also change your gender. And regardless of whether you're coming in for a buzz cut or the combination of every transition surgery possible, it's 500 dollars. So it's either a stupidly expensive haircut, or the best gender transition plan ever. Sign me the fuck up.

JAYE: What was really surprising was after she changed her character – she gave this character an amazingly cheap transition – other players who she talked with or glanced at her screen, didn't make a big deal out of it.

JULIE: I kind of laugh that no one said anything but at the same time, if no one says anything, that's kind of cool. And I think, someone's like, "new haircut?" that's like the best response ever. If you want to be a true ally, when you reunite with an old friends who's transitioned, just say oh, new haircut? And you get all the ally points. You are the best ally.

ERIC: So are there other games where making a gender transition is actually part of the game mechanics?

JAYE: For me before playing Saint's Row 4, I hadn't been able to do that, but I also talked with another friend, Anne Bazarnek (spelling?), and she was telling me that she had the same experience playing RuneScape, which is a game a lot of kids used to play in the early 2000s because it's kind of like a medeival fantasy version of The Sims.

ANNE: There is in the game, a character called the makeover mage, who for 3000 gold coins, would change your character's gender. And I thought that was a very like nice and pleasant idea and I was like, oh wouldn't it be just so wonderful if I could uh, you know pay my 3000 gold coins [laughs] and have it all done with.

CLIP: RUNESCAPE

ERIC: So I have another question, everyone you talked with – when they're having these experiences and exploring gender in the games – how old are they?

JAYE: The people I spoke to, it was often in adolescence, sort of around 10 years old until 16. For me I was about 18 when I consciously started doing this. And for a lot of kids, that's a tough time to deal with these complex feelings of gender. I mean, it was hard for Anne.

ANNE: The way I grew up it was strictly gendered, behave as a man behaves – don't do anything vaguely feminine. Masculinity, specifically toxic masculinity was very strictly enforced. And so I felt shame interacting in physical spaces along these lines so I wouldn't tell anyone about any of these things, but online I had basically free reign to talk about these things without any of the fears of repercussions that I might have had in my actual everyday life.

ERIC: So it sounds like video games aren't just a place to experiment with your gender -- they can be safe spaces, or a virtual safe space?

JAYE: Yeah, that's the hope. I mean, Anne was really afraid that her friends or family would discover what she were doing in these games.

ANNE: A lot of the time I was too shameful and I was too paranoid to play a female character all the time, so a lot of the time I would have a male character because I was worried if someone came in my room and saw my screen they'd be why are you playing a girl character? And then I'd have to have a fumbling explanation of why because I hadn't heard the stock arguments why guys play girls in a video game yet so I didn't have anything at all besides, uh, well that's kind of how I want to be.

After the break, we'll hear more about the difficulties and success of trying to create a safe space within the world of video games.

> BREAK

Let's get back to my conversation with Jaye McAuliffe about the challenges of experimenting with gender in a virtual space that's not your own personal private space.

JAYE: There's another problem with creating a safe spaces online because a lot of games are multiplayer.

ERIC: Right because you're playing against other people and can interact with them.

JAYE: Exactly. And you can talk to them over voice chat. I already said you can't always tell a person's gender based on their voice. My friend Brynmore – who was talking about the game Dragon Age earlier – they also loved playing Overwatch.

CLIP: OVERWATCH

ERIC: Yeah, Overwatch is a really fun game it's kind of like a cartoonishly steampunk world where you're all just shooting at everyone, but the characters have these incredible backstories which are revealed in these short films that are the quality of a Pixar short film.

JAYE: Yeah, honestly, it's a ton of fun, but Brynmore discovered that mood doesn't always translate to the other players.

BRYNMORE: To say that the community can be toxic, would be an incredible understatement. And a lot of us who are trans or nonbinary, if we have to play with other players, say in like competitive, we won't do voice chat, because we don't want to take that risk of being like "oh you're a girl." "No, actually I'm not." and then it's like "but you sound like a girl." Yeahhh, but I'm kind of not. It's too much to deal with, almost. It's like I'm only gonna know this person for the 5 minutes that we're playing together and then I'm never gonna have to talk to them ever again in my life, but I would just rather, like yeah, we're just gonna go ahead and play the game. You can tell me I'm bad at whoever I'm playing, but please don't ask me about my gender. (laughs)

ERIC: Well, I know that toxic fandom is a huge issue -- and it's particularly bad in video games, GamerGate being a notorious example. So were the people you talked with, were they able to find a community in the games?

JAYE: They definitely were. So as I said before, my friend Anne Bazznick played Runescape a lot. You know, it's a fantasy game, it does a lot of the things we already talked about -- you create your own avatar, you plop them into this virtual world, and make choices, and then she ended up starting to find people in it – it's an online game, and she found those people at a fishing hole.

ERIC: A fishing hole in the game?

JAYE: Catching fish is actually a really big way to make money in the game.

ANNE: While it was mostly an inactive activity, you would just kind of sit there, click once every couple of minutes, wait for your inventory to fill up, and then go run to the bank to go drop off all your fish. It was very social because there were a bunch of people gathered around at these specific fishing spots and basically doing nothing so it became a little like mode of interaction of other people gathered around, clicking every few minutes and not doing anything besides that.

ERIC: That's so interesting, so she met people that way – standing around a virtual fishing hole.

JAYE: All those interactions are happening through text chat. But you know, Runescape is a game where there are a lot of younger players, they're kids trying to meet each other online, so in Anne's case, her parents are worried about stalkers and personal information.

ERIC: Yeah.

JAYE: But she did end up opening up to another player. This player was named Poseidon.

ANNE: I don't even remember how our interactions started, but I remember that they were one of the first people that I had talked about any sort of gender-related ideas to outside of myself. It was the first externalization of thoughts which had been private in the space of discussing with this one weird 13 year old who I met when I was 11.

JAYE: And Brynmore -- they played Final Fantasy 14, and they figured out a way to find a safe space by joining a guild.

ERIC: I know that Final Fantasy is a big multiplayer online game that's magical medieval fantasy, and I know what a guild was in real historic medieval era, but how does that work in the game?

JAYE: I'd kind of describe it as a club – a club of players in a big multiplayer online game. You can band together and do some of the quests together. It's really one big club and an easy way to meet new people. And this guild was extremely accepting and open for queer and trans people.

BRYNMORE: Essentially it was actually almost kind of normalized in that game, at least in like the guild that I was in, and the circle that I kind of kept to. It was you know, we could say oh this is my name and this is how I present and you can use these pronouns for me. It's okay if you use my character pronouns, you know that sort of thing. Eventually we would all just kind of open up to each other like, oh yeah by the way, this is why I do this, because like I can't be this way outside of this game.

ERIC: So then after everyone was having these really positive experiences in the games – did that help them come out in the real world?

JAYE: For a lot of people -- yeah. And actually after that point, those games just became games. I mean, I found that for me personally, when I play The Sims, I play all sorts of characters now. But for a lot of people, games are still super important. I mean, Brynmore now works in a video game store. They wear LGBT pins so people know the shop is queer-friendly. And a man started coming in to Brynmore' store with his son, who is trans.

BRYNMORE: He was just saying he was thankful that he could see you know someone who was happy at their job, and happy in their position, and that I was confident enough in who I am, and my identity that I could wear those pins in an environment that is genuinely not friendly towards the LGBT community and that -- yeah that I felt confident enough in myself that I could do that. And that is what he wants for his son.

ERIC: Wow, that's really nice, it helps them mentor the next generation.

JAYE: Yeah, I asked Julie Jawess if she had any advice for young people who are closeted right now, and too afraid to express that even in a video game.

JULIE: I would tell them to try not to be afraid to be yourself. Like obviously sometimes it's not safe to be yourself. But, if you're alone in your room, that's your space. You can be you there. If you're still living with your parents, or if you have a conservative roommate, or something like that, then you know, maybe your room isn't your space all the time. But if you can play a video game at midnight when you're just having your headphones in, don't be afraid to play as characters you more closely identify with. If you're not sure, experiment.

ERIC: And what about video game companies? If people are listening who work at video game companies, is there anything they can learn from this?

JAYE: Studios are really trying hard for more representation of queer and trans people, but they do have a lot of catching up to do. You see, historically, the video game industry is *pretty* homophobic. And some of the attempts to have a trans character in a game have been a bit of mess. Like in *Mass Effect Andromeda*. In this big epic sci-fi game, you meet his character and she immediately deadnames herself.

ERIC: And for people who don't know what deadnaming is?

JAYE: For trans people, your dead name is your name assigned at birth – your name before you transitioned. It's not something that a trans person would bring up in casual conversation. It's not polite to ask trans people what their deadname was. And the writers who created this trans character for *Mass Effect Andromeda* really should've known that.

HAINLY ABRAMS: "Back home, I was filling test tubes in some dead-end lab. People know me as Stephan. But that was never who I was. I knew what I could do, and I knew who I wanted to do it as: Hainly Abrams, Andromeda Explorer. That's me. Feels good. Feels right."

JAYE: Funny enough, that studio three years before with the game *Dragon Age Inquisition* did have a pretty positive representation of a trans character, but as I said, it's all over the place.

ERIC: But do you think it's getting better?

JAYE: Well, Bonnie Ruberg is pretty optimistic. She says there is more representation behind-the-scenes these days. And there are even more queer gaming events too.

BONNIE: You know when you go to a conference where people are talking about making games and you see other queer and trans people, you're like oh my gosh, there is a place for me in this industry.

JAYE: And she's excited about the possibility indie games have. They have a lot more leeway than big studio games and they can appeal directly to trans and queer players.

BONNIE: For example, there's a game that I love called realistic kissing simulator. And it's a game where 2 people play, they stand at the same keyboard, and they just have 2 faces on either side of a screen, and each face has a long floppy tongue. And they kind of intertwine their tongues. There's no goal to the game, there are no rules to the game, and I interviewed the people who made it recently, who are queer gamemakers and trans gamemakers, and they said that the way that you play that game is really designed to speak to their experiences as trans people. Because it's about having a body that doesn't quite fit you, but you're still trying to find closeness with people.

CLIP: KISSING SIMULATOR

ERIC: I've actually seen that game because it's really funny, it's very cartoonish and funny. There are all these videos on YouTube of people trying to play it and they're all just cracking up.

JAYE: There's so many games like that – realistic something simulator.

ERIC: Yeah, but what about you? Now that you've talked with your friends about this, and you've talked with Bo about this, did any parts of their stories resonated with you the most?

JAYE: I'm a trans woman, and I used to feel like in games I had to prove my femininity or I had to be very feminine. In real life too now to be seen as a woman. But now, in the characters I play, they still reflect me a bit and in how I exist in the real world, I'm a lot more comfortable with dressing masculine and feminine because that's honestly how we all are, a combination of masculinity and femininity. So now my characters are sorts of – I play guys and girls and I feel free and comfortable with that.

ERIC: And it's funny, how does that reflect back to you on video games, and the idea of customization, and the idea that you can customize yourself?

JAYE: Last night, I was playing The Sims 4, and I pulled out that character of myself and I changed her a bit. I ended up doing things I wouldn't do in the real world, and I wouldn't want to necessarily, and it was fun to do that, to see those choices play out in front of me.

ERIC: All right, well that is it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Jaye McAullife. And who else are we thanking?

JAYE: Yeah, I want to thank Bonnie Ruberg, Anne Bazarneck, Julie Jawless, and Brynmore Ruiz for talking to me for this story. It was great hearing all your expeirences.

ERIC: Cool, and where can people follow you?

JAYE: Yeah, you can follow me at Instagram at Jaye McAullife, I post a lot of stuff about my podcast there.

ERIC: My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. And the show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org. And if you want the full back catlog of episode, go to Stitcher premium and subscribe using the promo code Imaginary.