

# Making a Face: Gender, Race, and Avatar Technologies

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## Intro: Getting Under the Hood of Face Makers

Even when tech systems are designed with efficiency and hardware limitations in mind, they retain the traces of cultural assumptions and hierarchies. Most avatar creation tools are bundled in proprietary software whose source code is not available, and whose designers may be bound by non-disclosure agreements or unaware of the implications of some of their choices. Direct manipulation of these systems can yield patterns, limitations, and unexpected errors that can point toward their deeper cultural implications.

## Assessing Avatar Systems: Some Techniques

**Deformance:** Taking its name from literary criticism, this technique attempts to tease out the limits of a given system and determine if limits differ by gender or race.



*The Sims 3* - Female Deformances

**Compositing:** Combining images captured from avatar systems can help reveal slider settings, facial similarities, and other trends that may not be readily apparent.



*Fallout 3* - Average of all default African American (L) and Caucasian (R) Male avatars



*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* - Default Male Imperial Avatar (L), attempt at recreation with Female avatar (R)

**Gender Flex Test:** Does a system support non-traditional gender expression? Are “female” avatars restricted to “feminine” facial traits? Is makeup or facial hair optional or restricted to certain avatars?



*Mass Effect (1, 2, 3)* - Female Commander Shepard avatars

**Whites-only Test:** Does a system offer skin tones, facial features, and/or hair textures that are conducive to creating faces that may be read as other than white? Are they labeled as such?