Diversity and Representation in Gaming

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Images not final

Problem

Women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals have expressed frustration at the difficulty of finding themselves represented in video game protagonists. All too frequently, they are forced to play as straight, White males as the default. Our research sought to establish to what degree there is inequality in representation in video game protagonists.

Methods

We analyzed 1,700 video games from 2005 to 2015 and categorized them according to whether they had a protagonist, whether that protagonist was fixed or customizable, and what the protagonist's species, gender, complexion, race/ethnicity, age, and romantic/sexual orientation were.
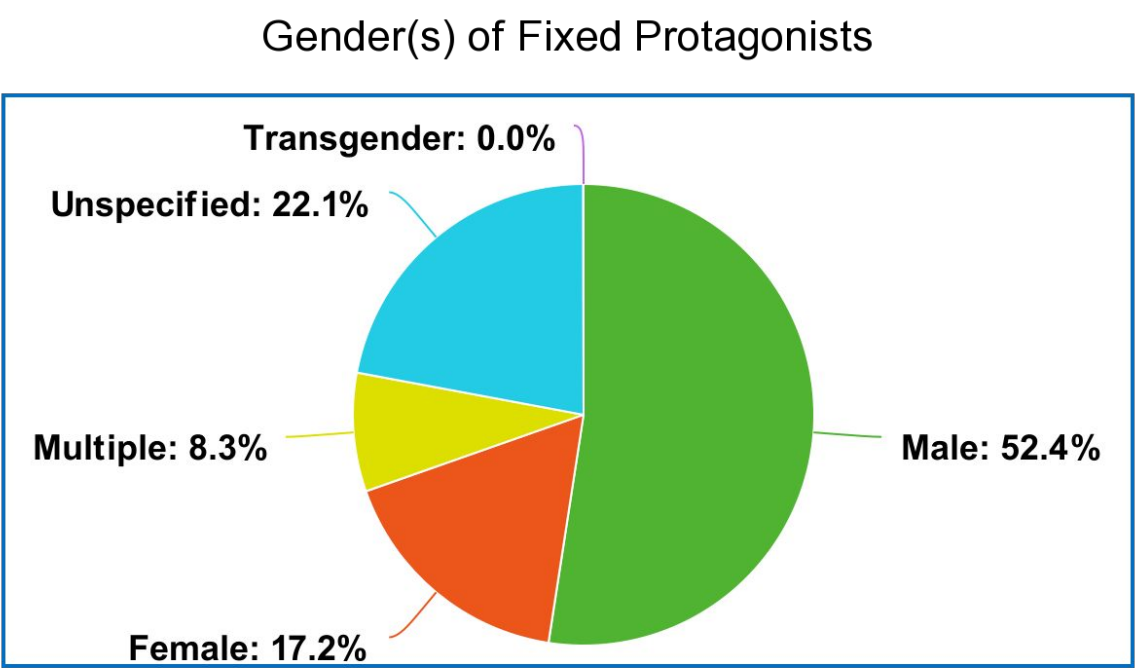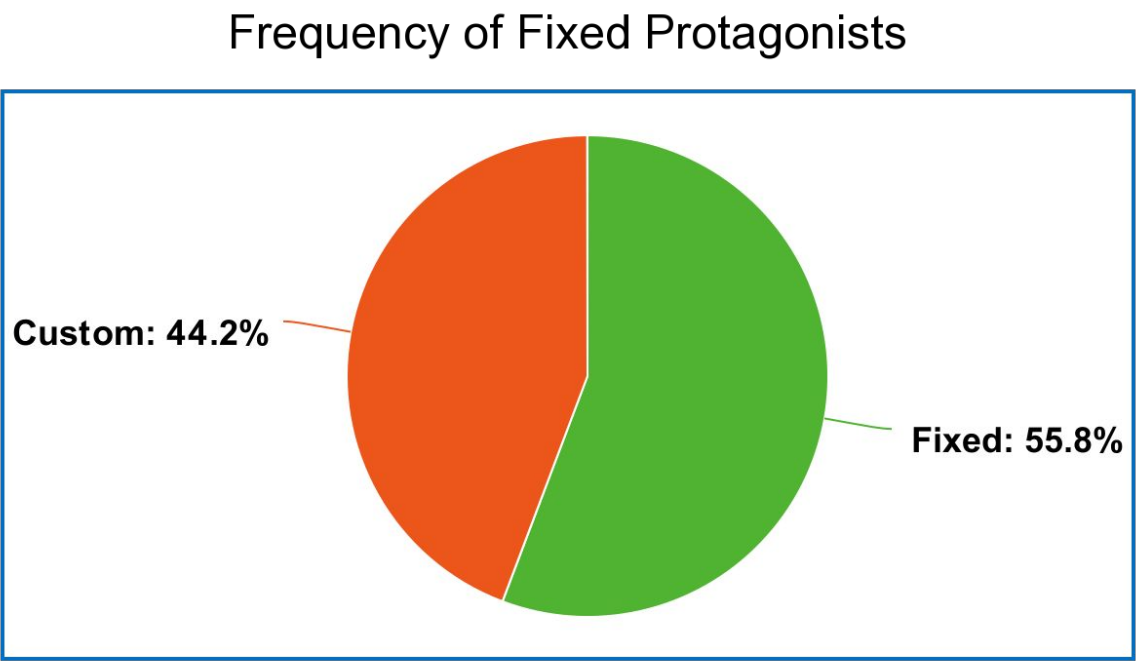
Term	Information
Type 1-2	Type I - always burns, never tans (pale white skin) Type II – always burns easily, tans minimally (white skin)
Type 3	Type III – burns moderately, tans uniformly (light brown skin)
Type 4	Type IV – burns minimally, always tans well (moderate brown skin)
Type 5	Type V - rarely burns, tans profusely (dark brown skin)
Type 6	Type VI - never burns (deeply pigmented dark brown to black skin)
Other	Complexion could potentially be assigned to the protagonist (likely because the protagonist is a human or a non-human personified in some form), but the complexion is not captured in the range of standard human skin tones (i.e. protagonist is an elf with green skin).
Not Applicable	It does not make sense to assign complexion to the protagonist (i.e. protagonist is an inanimate object and does not have personified features).

The above scale was used to describe complexion for protagonists, especially for characters from non-Earth settings where human labels for ethnicity would be inappropriate. All complexion terms are derived from the Fitzpatrick Scale.
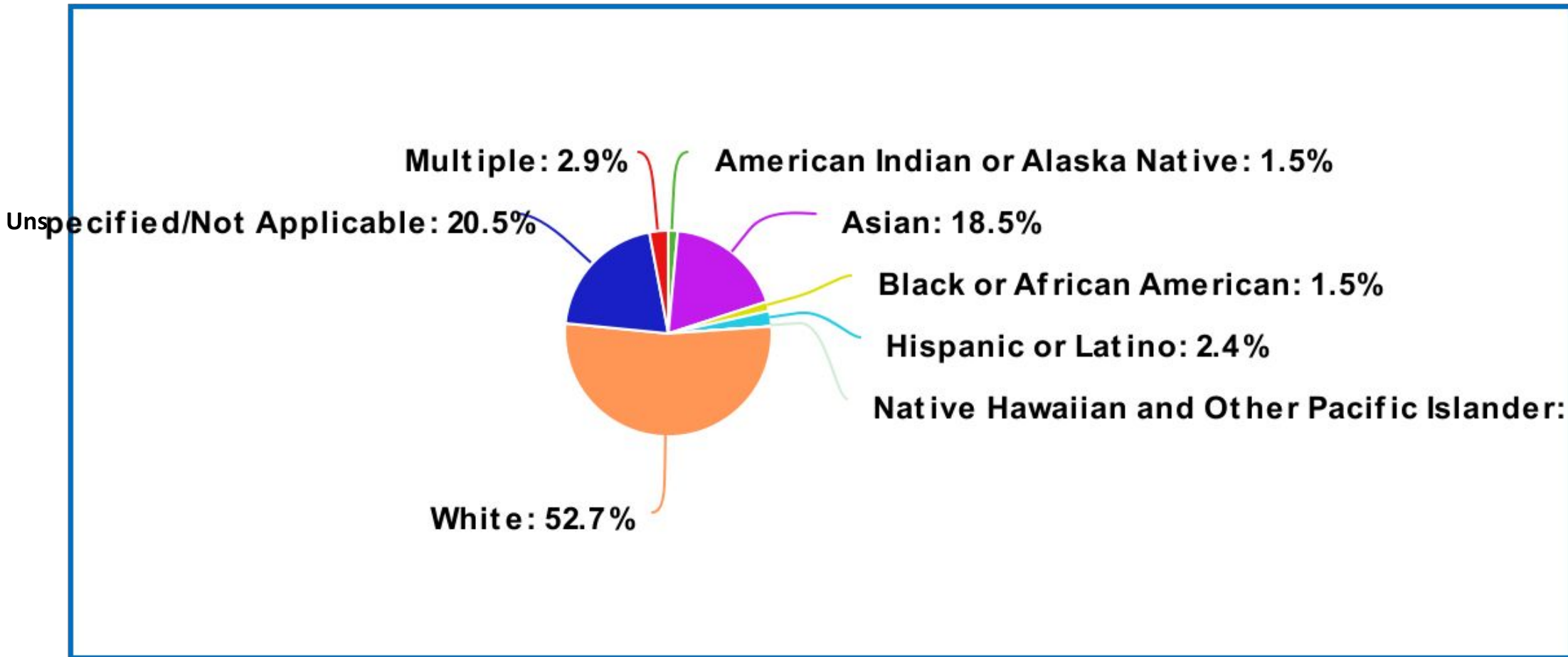
Limitations

We were given a controlled vocabulary to apply developed by the GAMER Group, along with a database to use. Unfortunately, the database did not fully code for all the options designated in the CV, and we were unable to edit those. For example, in the gender category, "Transgender" was a separate category from "Male" or "Female," when it was supposed to have been an *additional* descriptor. Also missing from the descriptors was a Middle Eastern ethnicity tag. Further, coding for games with protagonists of multiple complexions was not originally supported, so we had to make adjustments.
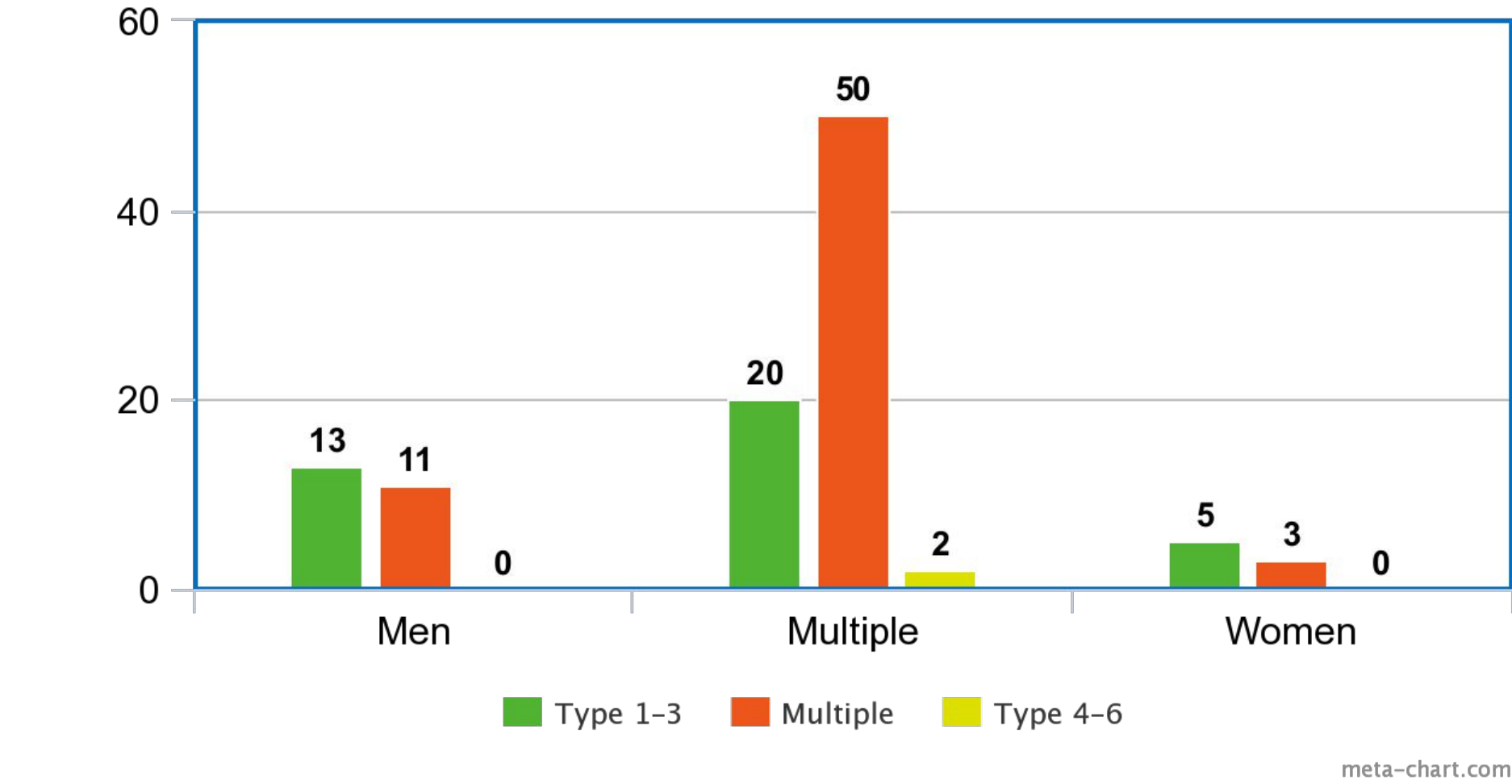
We also had labor difficulties, as almost all of our original volunteers disappeared. We adjusted by launching a social media outreach for volunteers through FaceBook and Twitter, through accounts like Not Your Mama's Gamer and Black Girl Gamers. This secured an additional 30 volunteers.
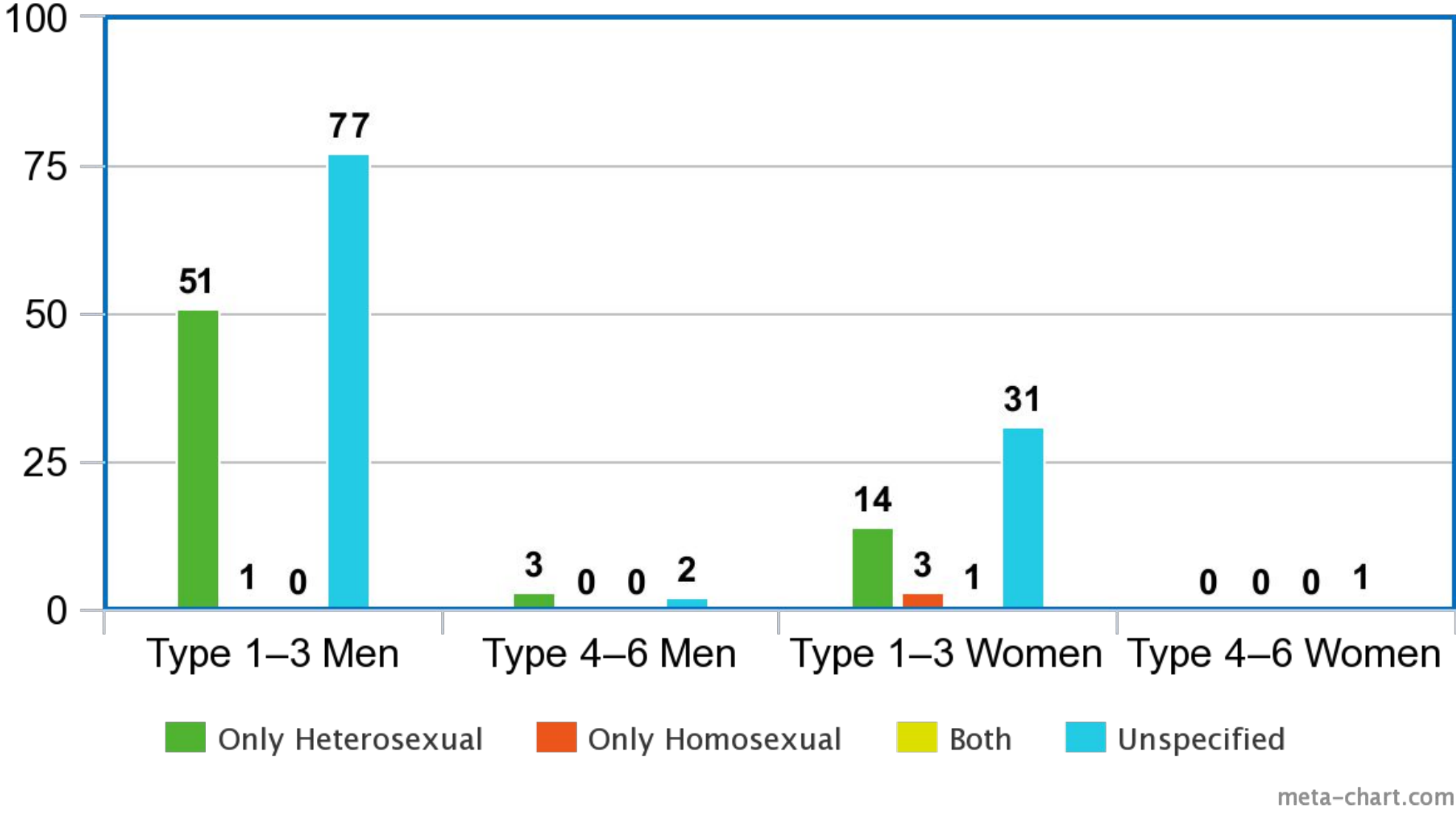
Frequency of Fixed Protagonists

Custom: 44.2%
Fixed: 55.8%

Gender(s) of Fixed Protagonists

Transgender: 0.0%
Unspecified: 22.1%
Multiple: 8.3%
Female: 17.2%
Male: 52.4%

Ethnicities of Fixed Protagonists

Multiple: 2.9%
Unspecified/Not Applicable: 20.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native: 1.5%
Asian: 18.5%
Black or African American: 1.5%
Hispanic or Latino: 2.4%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 0.
White: 52.7%

Complexion and Gender(s) of Customizable Characters

	Type 1–3	Multiple	Type 4–6
Men	13	11	0
Multiple	20	50	2
Women	5	3	0

meta-chart.com

Note: For customizable characters, sexuality was almost always unspecified.

Sexuality vs. Complexion vs. Gender of Fixed Protagonists

	Only Heterosexual	Only Homosexual	Both	Unspecified
Type 1–3 Men	51	1	0	77
Type 4–6 Men	3	0	0	2
Type 1–3 Women	14	3	1	31
Type 4–6 Women	0	0	0	1

meta-chart.com

Summary

- Darker complexions, specifically Types 5 and 6, are critically underrepresented.
- We found no titles with transgender fixed protagonists, and only a handful of customizable titles explicitly allow you to make trans characters.
- Non-heterosexual identities are virtually absent, even in titles where players can customize their characters to a high degree. The romantic options simply are not available.
- Heterosexuality is not only explicitly the default in most cases, but is also assumed to be the default when other sexualities are not explicitly stated (as our volunteers' annotations often showed).

Future Steps

There are still more than 3,500 titles catalog, dating back to 1947! The earliest games pose a challenge, as little relevant documentation exists. Further volunteers will need to be recruited for the next round of data collection. Also, this project proves that substantial clean-up of volunteer data is a must. After that, a comprehensive historical analysis of trends in protagonist representation will be possible. The GAMER Group seeks to publish such an analysis for the edification of industry publications, non-profits, and publishers/developers. Hopefully, with quantifiable data to demonstrate the historical inequality in representation, coupled with demographic data on the current gamer population, publishers/developers will see the value in being more inclusive in their design.