

テレビゲームにおける新奇的な単数形「they」の使用の正規化について

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On the normalization of novel singular ‘they’ usage in video games

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this paper is to document a particular type of novel usage of the so-called singular ‘they’ in video games. The manner in which singular ‘they’ is used in these games suggests that this novel usage is normalized or, at least, normalizing in some contexts.

Forms of ST usage

Some usages of the so-called singular ‘they’ (hereafter: ST), the use of the pronoun ‘they’ with a singular antecedent or for a singular referent, are both long-established and well-established in current English (Balhorn, 2004; Curzan, 2003). Among the most long- and well-established usages of ST are using ‘they’ to refer to antecedents/referents that indefinite are or quantificational, or whose notional gender (McConnell-Ginet, 2015) is epicene/unknown/hidden. Examples of such usage of ST are in (1).

- (1) a. Has every guest found their seat?
b. Someone left their book on the table.

c. If anyone misses the meeting, I will reach out to them by email.

d. Each driver is responsible for finding their own parking.

ST is also frequently used even for gendered antecedents as long as they are quantified. An example of this usage is in (2), and is taken from an interview with the author Toni Morrison and reported in Meyers (1993).

- (2) a. Everybody’s grandmother was a teenager when they got pregnant.

ST is recognized as a frequently deployed, in both speech and writing, third-person singular pronoun for generic or unspecified antecedents (Baranowski, 2002; LaScotte, 2016; Newman, 1992; Paterson, 2011). However, there are some people who contest the acceptability of ST and promote a proscription of it. Prescriptive antagonism toward the use of ST stems from the opinions of 18th century English grammarians who

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disparaged the use of ST through specious appeals to the grammar of Latin and overtly male-centric reasoning, claiming that the masculine encompasses the feminine (Bodine, 1975). Attempts to abolish ST failed, but they attached a stigma to ST that saw it marginalized in pedagogic settings, prescriptive contexts, and formulations of Standard English.

Concerns raised then about number agreement in ST usage may persist (MacKay, 1980) ; however, that morphosyntactically plural pronouns may be used for singular reference is not truly in question (e.g., Eberhard et al., 2005; Paterson, 2014; Sauerland et al., 2005). Other expressions of concern from linguists have been rooted in pessimism regarding ST's potential uptake (Lakoff, 1975). However, usage is widespread and expanding. A shift in perceptions of ST's acceptability has even been taking place in strongly prescriptive domains such that ST is rapidly replacing generic 'he' in many contexts. Whereas a few decades ago ST could be described as "nonstandard usage" and "not accepted by most handbooks today" (Nichols, 1988, p. 180), now it is accepted/recommended as an epicene option by several style and usage guides (e.g., Easton, 2017; Lee, 2019). Kosei (1993) presciently wrote of this trend in attitudes: "just as the accusative plural *you* has supplanted the other forms of the second person pronouns for social reasons, *they* has begun to enter the canons [*sic*] of sanctioned locutions and is driving singular (*sic*; generic) *he* out of its last stronghold, formal written language" (p. 54).

In addition to the long- and well-established forms of ST usage, there are novel usages. In some novel forms of use, ST is used to refer to definite, specific antecedents whose gender is known or inferable, but whose description/name is ungendered (Konnolly & Cowper, 2020), as in the examples in (3).

- (3) a. My boss always leaves their door open.
- b. Your teacher asked me to tell you that they would be late.
- c. His oldest kid showed me where they hid the ball.

Other novel ST usage forms involve referring to specific antecedents of known gender whose description/name is gendered (Ibid.), as in (4).

- (4) a. Her brother brought their own drinks.
- b. Elizabeth forgot their purse.

These novel extensions of ST indicate that it is an option, in some people's mental grammars, for any animate third-person singular reference, even when the antecedent/referent is overtly gendered/sexed (Brown, 2023). Yet, while the presence of novel ST usages in some people's mental grammars may be spreading, and the general perception of acceptability may be growing, we might still wonder about how normal are, how *normalized* are, the novel ST usages? In the following, I do not intend to answer this question, but rather I will document a specific

type of novel ST usage in a domain which suggests a normalization of the novel usages is occurring : the use of ST to refer to overtly and binarily (M/F) gendered antecedents/referents in video games.

ST in Video Games

Scholarly attention has been paid to how video games may allow players to create characters with diverse gender identities and select which pronouns to use for the characters (Stanfill et al., 2024), as well as to developing resources for game developers to design inclusive character creation systems (Topolova, 2021). Such work may overlap somewhat with the concerns of this paper, but not fully. At present, I am not exploring how game players choose to be, or choose their character to be, referred to; nor whether character creation systems contain a diverse array of options in terms of gender or pronouns. Neither am I looking at experiences of, say, non-binary game players or the representation of non-binary in-game characters. Rather, I am looking at examples of in-game use of ST to refer to overtly gendered antecedents/referents.

For example, in the 2021 game *Mario Party Superstars*, in-game characters such as Mario and Princess Peach, who are fictional but clearly male- and female-coded, respectively, are in some instances referred to with ST (as are other characters). In one game mode, players control a character (say, Mario) in a boardgame-like game. The goal in this game mode is to obtain more coins and stars than the other players. There is a square on the

board which, if landed on, allows the player (human or CPU) who landed on it to steal a non-predetermined number of another player's coins through the assistance of a ghost-like character called "Boo". Imagine Boo steals coins from Mario (who is, to be clear, male-coded) for Princess Peach. When Boo returns to Princess Peach with the coins, Boo may say, "Did you see that? I nabbed [number] of their coins!" – so we have a case of male-coded Mario being referred to with ST. This might be interesting for any number of reasons, but for the concerns of this paper, the crucial point is that this usage is done in what seems to be a quite *normalized* manner; that is, as if ST is the *normal* (perhaps easiest, perhaps default) pronoun option for this situation even though Mario is male-coded.

Another example is from the 2023 soccer video game *EA Sports FC 24* in which, like many other sports video games, includes the likenesses and names of actual human referents (in this case, professional soccer players, both men and women). Depending on the game mode, the game player may have control over a professional club's personnel, player transfers, contracts, and training schedules. As part of this control over the club and team operations, the player, in the guise of coach/manager, receives in-game emails. One email's body may read, "[name of real professional soccer player] recently joined the team. Given the investment done to bring the player into the team, you should probably setup a Performance Focused Training Plan, to have them up and running

as soon as possible and ready for the next match.” Perhaps even more intriguing than using ST for male-coded Mario, in this game the in-game version of an actual professional soccer player of known gender is referred to with ST.

EA Sports FC 24 does this on more than one occasion. The body of another in-game email may read, “Looks like [name of real professional soccer player]’s current training plan isn’t really having enough impact. You might want to think about adjusting their schedule. If you’re planning to include them in the line-up, you need a plan focused more specifically on Energy to ensure you get what you need from them in the next game.” In this case, ST is used three times in the body of the message; so, it is apparently not some sort of mistake or oversight. It seems to be deployed in a straightforward manner even though the referent is overtly and binarily gendered.

Other sports games in my knowledge that use ST to refer to in-game referents who are the likenesses of real professional athletes in this sort of *normalized* (in the sense of being a regular, simple, and unremarkable (even default or baseline)) choice, without any apparent intention of special attention being paid to gender inclusivity via ST usage in the game development include *NBA 2k23*, *WWE 2k23*, *PGA Tour 2K21*, and the 2024 boxing game *Undisputed*.

Discussion

There may be several reasons why this ST usage appears to be *normalized*, or at least

normalizing, in these games. However, to my mind the most plausible reason is one of simple logistics: ST saves game developers time and money. By using ST to refer to overtly and binarily gendered antecedents/referents, fewer lines of code are needed than if ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns were always deployed; similarly, voice actors or professional broadcasters who lend their voices to these games only need to record one line using ST rather than record multiple lines using ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns.

Regardless of the precise decision-making that goes into the occurrences of novel ST usages in these games, it is clear that the game developers have decided that using ST in this way is, essentially, acceptable. The repeated occurrences, deemed acceptable for these situations, then contribute to the normalization of this kind of ST usage in which its deployment is not necessarily related to any efforts toward gender inclusivity, but to simple matters of ease and efficiency. That is, such novel usages of ST are deployed in these games as plain, regular, unremarkable, and *normal* pronoun choices suitable for the in-game situations.

Conclusion

Further questions may be raised, of course. Do game players notice this? Do game players support or resist the normalization of these novel usages of ST? Is this evidence of ST, or novel usages of it, becoming a part of so-called Standard English? Is it evidence of destandardization? This paper, however, is of limited scope – the intention here is merely to

document the normalized/normalizing deployment of these novel forms of ST usage in video games. The specific novel usage documented here is the use of ST for overtly and binarily gendered antecedents/referents. Hopefully, documented examples like these might inform future research questions and avenues of inquiry regarding topics including, but not limited to, changes in the English pronominal system and linguistic choices in video games and other forms of entertainment.

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