From Needy and Dependent to Independent Homo Ludens: Exploring Digital Gaming and Older People

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We began assembling this special issue because the use of digital computers for gaming (digital gaming) in later life has been rather underresearched, yet we know of a growing body of interested parties across the world starting to look into it and needed a place to bring it together.

For this introduction to the articles on offer, we wanted to explore first why such a topic is so underresearched. We live in an aging society and in many nations across the globe, life expectancy is rising. In the United Kingdom, for example, there are now more people aged over 60 than those aged under 18 for the first time in history (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2014b). In such countries, the number and proportion of people aged 65 and older are expected to continue to rise, with the prevalence of older adults increasing the most. The first issue is that an aging population is often viewed as dire and problematic for society; the burden of the old age utilizing health care and accessing benefits and pensions creating a drain on society. Response has been by many governments to reduce what is often perceived as an inevitable decline, keeping older people healthy and active and out of health care, keeping people socially connected, and keeping people independent and at home. In true technocratic style, technological research has followed suit, examining how technology and computing might reduce this deficit and problem of old age, for example, developing technologies that keep people in touch with families and friends and create safer homes through smart home sensors. Playing games on the computer do not, at first glance, naturally fit with this approach. Play is often seen as the unnecessary, discretionary acts we do, to be done after work is complete. Yet to live is to play and we are inspired by Huizinga's description of Homo Ludens the view that humans are playful beings and a need to emphasize informality, curiosity, and humor across the life course to live a truly fulfilled life (Huizinga, 1970; Blythe, et al., 2010).

Another major reason research into digital gaming in later life is so sparse is that there is still a discourse that older people do not want to use computers or, indeed, cannot use computers. Substantial efforts have been made to increase older people's use of computers in many countries, through education and training and provision of computers in public spaces, to reduce the so-called digital divide between users and nonusers with regard to accessibility, connectivity, and involvement. Often this is centered on very basic utilitarian use of the Internet, to look on maps, to shop, to look for information, for example, but it also may involve reminiscing, socialization, and more increasingly recreation. But more often than not computer training and education for older people do not involve the promotion of games for similar reasons above. The discourse is changing, and figures suggest that there are ever increasing number of computer and Internet users among older age, of which many of them use computer to play games. In the United Kingdom, 42% of people aged 65 years old and older use the Internet daily and 14% weekly (compares to 73% daily and 10% weekly among all age-groups; ONS, 2014a). The figures in 2006 were substantially different, 9% of people aged 65 used the Internet daily and 8% used it weekly (ONS, 2014a).

So a new story or discourse is emerging to which this set of articles belongs. Longevity is synonymous with increased leisure time and older people actively want to remain engaged with society and want to have fun and want to play. In a recent U.K. survey carried out on those aged over 65, the most common aspiration older people had was for leisure activities and hobbies (81%; Humphrey, Lee, & Green,2011).

The articles in this special issue show the direct utilitarian benefits of playing digital games, as well as the intrinsic pleasure derived from playing. Cutler et al. (in this issue) remind us what might traditionally be viewed as an entertainment medium can also promote a healthy aging agenda for those with dementia encompassing cognitive, physical, and social stimulus and support lifelong learning and independence. Osmanovic and Pecchioni (in this issue) show how games improve social connectedness among players, and furthermore, Zhang (in this issue) notes that massively multiplayer online role-playing games actually become like a third space for social connections to take place akin to coffee shops in the nondigital world. Schell et al. (in this issue) show how playing a digital game can also decrease loneliness. De Shutter et al. (in this issue), by contrast, focus on enjoyment from games and identify three different types of enjoyment: hedonic, eudaimonic, and telic. Similarly, Marston et al. (in this issue) show how flow can be induced from games that have the primary function of improving exercise.

The articles include participants from different cultures and nations—United Kingdom (Cutler et al., in this issue), Belgium (DeSchutter et al., in this issue), Germany, Spain, Australia (Marston et al., in this issue), and the United States (DeSchutter et al., in this issue). The articles come from very different epistemology and utilize different methodologies: Marston et al. (in this issue) use a randomized control trial, Schell et al. (in this issue) utilize standardized tests, and Mosberg Iversen (in this issue) advocates anthropology. Moving forward, the articles highlight the need for older people to be recognized as potential and actual serious gamers. They need to be more involved in the design and development of games than they are at the moment. Osmanovic and Pecchioni (in this issue) and Sayago et al. (in this issue) conclude it is vital for designers, researchers, academics, and industry to design, utilize, and conduct studies with aging populations to maximize benefits for older people themselves.

As a collective, the articles move the genre forwards, no longer are we just looking at gaming in later life as fulfilling a deficit but instead are looking at the interdisciplinary role digital gaming and gerontology research may have to improving health and quality of life. In addition, findings from these studies agree that digital game use by older adults may create new social connections and opportunities for older people, representing the emancipation of aging away from simple discourses of frailty, needy, impoverished, and disabled.

References

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