Factors Influencing the Adoption of Video Games in Late Adulthood: A Survey of Older Adult Gamers

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In the video game industry, older adults tend to be avid consumers. Although considerable research has been devoted to the positive cognitive effects of video games, less attention has been paid to the older adult gamer profile. The aim of this paper is to describe a survey conducted from November 2012 until May 2013, which includes 245 gamers aged 50 and over, about their game preferences. Specifically, the authors examined: (a) what types of video games are played and (b) what leads these players to be engaged by video games. The results indicate that adventure games with problem-solving are preferred, suggesting the skills that participants would like to practise. The study provides insight into a new video gamer profile.

KEYWORDS
Accessibility, Ageing, Computer-Mediated Communication, Game-Mediated Communication, Game-playing, Information and Communications Technology, Skills, Social Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

The world population is ageing. In fact, longer life expectancy and decreasing birth rates have led to growth in the ratio of the number of older adults to youngsters. A United Nations (2007) report from the Population Division predicts the percentage of older adults will more than double worldwide over the next half century.

Regarding economics and market behaviour, older adults should have special attention. Some studies (e.g. Meadow, Cosmas, & Plotkin, 1981) indicate that this age group has more purchasing power compared to young adults, over the years. The older adults are also likely to be the group with most free time to occupy.

Given that time availability and purchasing power are important components that feed the video game industry, a rapid change in the video game market landscape is needed (Pearce, 2008).

Video games are also conquering retirees. Due to the rapid change of society, designing products or services catering for their needs and motivations has been more and more in demand. Therefore, video games for older adults are at the heart of our understanding of their preferences and aims to play.

A considerable amount of literature (e.g. Anguera et al., 2013; Nouchi et al., 2012) has been published on the cognitive effects of video games. These studies indicate that games play a crucial role in maintaining and improving older adults’ capacities and stimulate their brain activity. For example, the neuroscience researcher Dr. Kawashima shows that playing challenging games could improve cognitive capacities (Pearce, 2008). Moreover, several lines of evidence (e.g. Aison, Davis, Milner, & Targum, 2002) suggest that video games can improve some cognitive functions such as short-term memory capacity, attention, hand-eye coordination and autonomy in problem-solving.
Regarding physiological effects of the ageing process, exergames are suggested to be fundamental in encouraging physical exercising and preventing from falls (Garcia, et al., 2012).

Although extensive research has been carried out on the cognitive and physical effects of video games, there are still few references (e.g. De Schutter, & Vanden Abeele, 2010; Marston, 2012; Pearce, 2008) to the main design components, which motivate older adults to play. Additionally, the ageing process often involves dealing with communication problems and social isolation. Thus, a high level of connectivity between players can be of great value in the lives of older adults, although, more recently, literature has emerged that offers contradictory results about the older adults’ preferences for playing multiplayer video games or single player ones.

The main purpose of this study is to understand: (a) the strongest reasons, which motivate gamers aged 50 and over to play; (b) the design components valued in video games; (c) the skills that gamers would like to practise; and (d) the technologies used to play and to communicate. The research question is “What are the main attitudes, motivations and routines relative to video game playing of adults aged 50 and over?”

Qualitative and quantitative research designs were adopted to provide descriptive and interpretative data. The survey was conducted and data was gathered via email and online communities. For practical reasons, a comprehensive review of the playing preferences and routines of all players aged 50 and over cannot be provided. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of this research to examine the gamer profile of 245 gamers (193 gamers aged between 50-65 and 52 gamers aged 65 and over).

The impetus for the study arose from the scarcity of information about the older adult’s gamer profile as well as from our previous research, involving older adults and ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), carried out under the Project XXXX.1

Throughout this paper, the term ‘G1’ refers to individuals aged between 50 and 64 whereas the term ‘G2’ refers to the group of individuals aged 65 and over.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING VIDEO GAMES IN LATE ADULTHOOD

As was pointed out in the introduction of this paper, the effect of video games on cognitive and physical functions (e.g., reduced mobility and declines in perceptual speed, memory or visual-perceptual functions) has drawn the attention of researchers (Fisk, Rogers, Charness, Czaja, & Sharit, 2009). Indeed, video games for older adults have begun to attract the attention of academics and this may produce results, which the game industry will have to take into account. Nevertheless, there has been little discussion about the potential for building relationships and social support through such games.

Previous research into the social component of video games for older adults has yielded contradictory results. On the one hand, several studies (e.g. De Schutter & Vanden Abeele, 2008; Ijsselsteijn, Nap, De Kort, & Poels, 2007) have shown that collective interaction and social support were crucial to encourage older adults to play. On the other hand, other studies (e.g. De Schutter & Abeele, 2010; Gajadhar, Nap, de Kort, & IJsselsteijn, 2010) have pointed out that an online co-playing experience was less enjoyable than solitary and single mode games.

According to Pearce (2008), the older adults are devoted players, although the mainstream game industry and game press have been ignoring their distinct needs and have not yet seen the potential of this target-audience. In her major study about ‘baby boomer’ gamers, Pearce (2008) has found that there are virtual communities (i.e. the Uru refugees in There.com), in which the game culture is becoming richer by integrating the players in the activities, regardless of their age. Moreover, Pearce’s studies are important to tear down some stereotypes regarding the baby boomer player.

Similarly, Marston (2012) has carried out several investigations into inclusivity of game design for an older audience by taking into account the game content and interaction to enhance the whole game experience. The author also outlines that games should have a purpose and accessible interfaces in order to meet the end users’ needs.
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