Chapter 9

Using Notions of “Play” Over the Life Course to Inform Game Design for Older Populations

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ABSTRACT

Play is a lifelong construct that is individually defined and is influenced by multiple variables that affect how play is interpreted and experienced in old age. This chapter highlights the significance of using a life course perspective to explore how play is shaped and reflected through digital gameplay and preferences as a game player ages. Using grounded theory methodology, 51 participants (age 43–77) were interviewed individually. The resulting transcripts were coded to identify emergent themes. The findings demonstrate 1) how play changes throughout the lifespan, 2) how play preferences established in childhood influence digital gameplay for aging adults, and 3) how aging adult gamers aspire to continue gaming as they grow older. Collectively, these themes provide insight into the aspects that need to be taken into account when designing games for aging gamer populations.

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INTRODUCTION

As evidenced by multiple market reports, digital gaming among older populations has increased in popularity over the past decade (Bosmans & Maskell, 2012; ESA, 2017). Correspondingly, academic research on the topic of games and aging has slowly increased as well. However, research that has analyzed older players of digital games has mainly focused on how older adults are playing games at the time during which the study was held (e.g., De Schutter, 2011; Nap, de Kort, & IJsselsteijn, 2009; Pearce, 2008; Skalsky Brown, 2014). Nonetheless, it has been well established within both gerontology (Elder, 1994) and developmental psychology (Baltes, 1987) that the analysis of later stages of human life should be evaluated through the lens of the entire life course, as opposed to only an individual’s current status. This finding has been also replicated in media studies, as media researchers have found lifespan approaches to be valuable for the study of various media, including television (van der Goot, Beentjes, & van Selm, 2006) and, to a lesser extent, digital games (e.g., De Schutter & Malliet, 2014).

The authors of this current study, therefore, argue that the pre-existing literature on the topic of actively playing older adults does not provide complete insight into the characteristics and distinctions among older age cohorts of gamers. Current recommendations for the design of games for older adults do not fully capture the nuances that are unique to older generations and have often been built on the analysis of contemporary context and the issues that older adults face when trying to play games (Gamberini et al., 2006; IJsselsteijn, Nap, de Kort, & Poels, 2007; McLaughlin, Gandy, Allaire, & Whitlock, 2012). Therefore, to capture a more holistic perspective, it is imperative to re-evaluate such recommendations through a lens that incorporates play through the older adults’ entire lifespan.

This study aims to provide a broader picture by exploring individual play histories of aging gamers from a life course perspective. As such, this perspective emphasizes the need to examine the construction and maintenance of individual gaming preferences that influence current gameplay. Furthermore, because play extends into old age and contributes to quality of life (Skalsky Brown, 2014), it is critical to identify and assess variables that may influence lifelong gamers as they age. This study approaches this need by drawing attention to the significance of gaming preferences and their association to age-related factors that may either promote or hinder game playing as a gamer ages. Based on these findings, a number of design considerations for game designers who aim to develop games for older adults are provided.
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