"You Have To Manage On Your Own": The Challenges and Resources of Gaming In Old Age

Gabrielle LAVENIR
The Seed Crew
815 La Pyrénéenne
Labège
gabrielle@theseedcrew.com

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THE RISE OF THE SILVER GAMER

The experience of "silver gamers," a marketing nickname for older adults who play video games, calls attention to discursive shifts about digital play, its instrumental potential, and its player communities. To discuss the questions that older players raise in that regard, I present the results of a research project on video game play in old age conducted in France between 2018 and 2021.

The research project combines a discursive analysis of the topic in European Francophone newspapers between 2000 and 2018 (Lavenir & Bourgeois 2017), a series of interviews with 16 older adults who play video games, and an ethnographic investigation of *WiiBowling* workshops and competitions in nursing homes during the spring of 2019 (Lavenir 2022). The ethnographic research followed the implementation of thirty video game workshops in as many care institutions in eighteen French cities and involved non-participant, overt observation. It explored workshop organizers' ambitions and participants' domestication of the practice. The interviews with older players focused on digital play at home in later life as well as respondents' techno-biography and play in the life course. The sample includes a wide variety of game genres (from match-3 puzzles like *Candy Crush* and indie games like *Limbo* to online *Scrabble* and adventure games like *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*) and play styles (from supervised workshops in nursing homes to hour-long online gaming sessions with friends).

AMBIVALENT PLAYERS

Drawing on the data collected during the fieldwork, I argue that older adults have a specific experience of play – not in a biologically deterministic sense that reduces older players' experience to dementia or arthritis, but in a perspective that accounts for older adults' distinctive experience of the social world. The patterns that characterize their play can be traced back to old age as an undesirable and subordinated social position that aging individuals manage through strategic uses of their leisure and technology (Peine *et al.* 2021). Video games prove both problematic and suitable for that purpose.

The figure of the "silver gamer" and its project of successful aging through digital play has gained traction over the past two decades, first in medical research and later in mainstream media and institutional contexts (Iversen 2016). Yet the "silver gamer"

discourse rarely resonates with older adults who play video games. Their engagement with digital play is not focused on cognitive health, intergenerational socialization, or digital literacy. Instead, in its diversity, older adults' video game play reflects the marginal position of old age in contemporary Western societies.

Older video game players are symbolically and quantitatively marginal among older adults as well as among video game players. In France, about a third of people over sixty play occasionally, a proportion significantly smaller than for other age groups (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). Those who do play are mostly absent from gaming spaces and communities. On one hand, playful activities are culturally associated with childhood and therefore problematic in adulthood, particularly in a stage of the life course where childlike behaviours raise suspicions of dementia. On the other hand, the representation of older adults as grouchy technophobes makes it difficult to imagine older gamers. As a result, older adults' interest in video games is received by others with attitudes that range from benevolent derision to strong disapproval (De Schutter, Vanden Abeele and Brown 2014).

Older adults who play video games are aware of their marginal place in gaming culture as well as the suspicions that surround their hobby. As a result, they tend to make their play as inconspicuous as possible, hiding it or reframing it as another, more acceptable activity (such as "doing a puzzle" or "messing around on the phone"). They are often solitary players with no access to play-centered social circles and communities. This shields their practice from criticism or interference while also limiting opportunities to learn about and master new games, genres, and play devices. As an interviewee remarked, "you have to manage on your own" when playing video games in later life. Consequently, older adults' practices are remarkably stable, often focusing on one game for a long time and taking extended breaks between periods of play. Older adults who play video games also manifest a high degree of reflexivity regarding the place of video games in their life, particularly in terms of time management. In that regard, video game play is ambiguous: its imagined addictive nature worries older adults, especially recent retirees who are particularly protective of their free time.

AGE MATTERS IN DIGITAL PLAY

Old age matters in video game play because its material, social, and symbolical circumstances of exclusion and marginality shape older players' experience. These circumstances constrain older individuals' play, particularly in terms of sociability and resources. But they also foster a disposition towards creative adaptation that facilitates older adults' domestication of video games. In that sense, older video game players engage in a distinctive form of play: not the stilted and health-focused project of the silver gamer, but the resilient and inconspicuous practices of those who finally make time for play. Video games are a challenge as well as a resource for individuals who are negotiating the undesirable and marginalized identity of "old person".

ENDNOTES

[1] Old age is considered here as a cultural category whose boundaries are constantly negotiated through interactions, institutional frameworks, and representations. Therefore, it has no fixed threshold. As old age is associated with retirement and the exit from formal work, the present research uses the historical age of retirement in France as a point of reference. Individuals who are near or over sixty share a collective predicament shaped by devalued cultural images of old age, a pressure to age successfully, an assignment to certain identities through interactions with relatives, friends, and strangers, a dependence on the State as a purveyor of pensions and benefits, and so on (Caradec 2012).

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