

Bridging Generations Through Play: Older Adults Gamers and Identity Formation

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INTRODUCTION

Many video games contribute to the formation of spaces categorized as hegemonic (Fron et al. 2007), where the presence of marginalized communities is diminished and compromised, especially if this includes people of color (Gray 2014), women (Cote 2020), older adults (Paul 2018), and players of different sexualities (Schelfhout et al. 2019). Large-scale content analysis found that video games are specifically tailored for the dominant culture, the white, straight young man, which results in the systematic exclusion of the “otherness” (Williams et al., 2009). This space is constructed, obeying highly masculine social norms, further pushing players who are not fulfilling the role of power gamers, and leaving them on the outskirts of the online world (Fox and Tang 2014). This study aims to address the existing issues through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, particularly those of older adults.

Despite the average age of gamers constantly increasing (approximately 37), seniors above the age of 65 represent only 7% (Press 2024). At the same time, the Western world is facing an aging population, whose interactions with games and gaming are of vast importance for their vulnerable position in society. This study explores the role of intergenerational play as a tool to increase gaming capital and gamer identity formation among older adults, resulting in higher participation in the gaming community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Intergenerational Play

Intergenerational video game play can serve as a tool for positive interactions and socialization for older adults (Hetzner and Pannese 2009; Vanden Abeele and De

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Schutter 2010). Gaming can be a tool for enjoyment and has therapeutic functions with physical, cognitive, and social impacts (Nguyen et al. 2017). Intergenerational play, specifically, can decrease levels of isolation and improve the quality of life (Williams et al. 2012). Promoting inclusive gaming spaces, increasing the diversity of the players, and including more participants can foster spaces and social support that increase the intention to start playing video games (Johnson et al. 2016). Existing studies are predominantly focused on serious games created for older adults that aim to combat specific health issues, but a gap exists regarding casual play focused on community engagement and participation.

Gaming Capital

According to Consalvo (2007, 4), gaming capital “is a key factor explaining the interactions between players and games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players.” She further elaborates on the term and outlines its role as a currency in the gaming world, which is changing over time and is different across platforms, players, and genres. The opportunity to connect with family members is a strong motivator for older generations when engaging in intergenerational play, leading to the acquisition of gaming capital (Volda and Greenberg 2012). Intergenerational play predicts increased levels of family interactions (Osmanovic and Pecchioni 2017). Older adults emphasize collaborative gameplay (Lavenir 2022), establishing a necessity for pre-existing social structures supporting them. The following research question is proposed:

RQ1. How does intergenerational play influence the gaming capital of older adult players?

Gamer Identity Formation

Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals identify based on group participation and social categories (Tajfel and Turner 2004). Gamers are usually portrayed as hardcore players, spending lots of time researching, improving, task-oriented, and achievement-motivated (Yim et al. 2023). Most hardcore players are younger, have a lot of free time, and are highly competitive and motivated. On the other hand, despite the usual abundance of time, older adults rarely have the competitive urge and usually remain casual players (Birk et al. 2017). Being a gamer is more than a hardcore vs casual dichotomy; it is a constructed identity, having real-world implications for the players. Welcoming space and social support from peers can increase the willingness to play (Johnson et al. 2016). Players associate video game interactions with well-being and self-development (Bourgonjon et al. 2016), establishing meaningful relationships and personal agency (Pettersson and Bhetwal 2025). The following research question is proposed:

RQ2. What is the role of intergenerational play in gamer identity formation among older adults?

METHODOLOGY

The study uses existing interview data collected as part of a previous study ($n=16$, mean age 32, 62.5% male) to explore the importance of intergenerational play as part of the process of becoming a gamer. Additionally, we will employ an open-ended

online survey, incorporating questions eliciting participants' perceptions on the specificities of gamer identity, gaming capital, and who gets to be in the gaming space.

Sample

The targeted population is adults 65 years or older, across the USA, with pre-existing gaming experience, while measuring the levels of experience as a possible confounder. Respondents ($N = 250$) will be recruited via Prolific and compensated for their participation.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using flexible coding. The survey data will be analyzed upon completion of the data collection process.

Preliminary data suggest that international play holds a leading role in introducing young and older family members to the gaming environment and establishing gaming habits. Participants outlined the importance of play as a tool to communicate, learn, and enjoy alongside their relatives. Additionally, in cases where intergenerational play was promoted as a bonding activity (in comparison to a distraction), participants reminisce about fond memories of these times. On the other hand, intergenerational play remains a sporadic activity beyond the learning phase, possibly due to quickly formed skill discrepancies or a change of family dynamics.

Expected Outcomes

The study will broaden knowledge of older adult participation in gaming. Exploring the role of intergenerational play on gaming capital and gamer identity formation across this population will further our understanding of the barriers they experience and find ways to include them as active members of the community. Understanding how to increase gaming capital and establish social ties can be beneficial for scholars and designers in their quest to build more inclusive and pleasurable gaming environments. As the older adults are the group with the most first-time players, promoting equitable access will increase social and cultural benefits and add revenue for the gaming studios.

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