Keynote: Digital games and future seniors

W.A. IJSSELSTEIJN. ***Digital games and the seniors of tomorrow.*** *Gerontechnology 2012;11(2):387;* doi:10.4017/gt.2012.11.02.562.00 **Purpose** Although it is clear that older adults still play fewer digital games than younger age groups, we can witness a demographic shift where currently ageing cohorts are increasingly using digital games as their virtual playgrounds. As digital games have become an integral part of the media consumption patterns of the baby-boomer's generation (people with birth dates between 1946 and 1964), the research community is challenged to provide a critical re-assessment of the role and function of digital games for the seniors of tomorrow. **Method** We will review the role and function of digital games in the lives of both the older and the soon-to-be older generations. By comparing and contrasting these two cohorts, we can distinguish between issues that are likely to be generation-related as opposed to those that are age-related. Whereas age-related issues will, to some extent, remain relevant for any ageing population, generation-related issues emerge from a shared set of behaviours, experiences, and values that are coupled to a common historical and socio-economic environment during the formative years (i.e., adolescence and young adulthood). **Results & Discussion** Generations are frequently defined based on socio-historical discontinuities, such as wars or economic depressions. Similarly, technology generations can be defined based on similarities in behaviour towards technology rooted in macro-technological events in their formative years[1]. The current cohort of seniors (over 65 years of age) has had relatively limited technology experience; mainly related to electro-mechanical devices, but not so much to digital information technology. Moreover, they share particular socio-economic histories, having lived through the war or the immediate post-war years as young adults, which has influenced their outlook on life, including their approach to leisure time, and their tastes for entertainment. The future generation of seniors shares a different set of experiences and values, having experienced higher levels of education, higher incomes, greater personal independence, and higher levels of health. This baby-boomer generation is challenging traditional conceptions of what it means to be "old" because their attitudes are so different from those of their parents. In the words of Christine Jeavens (BBC), "… even before the bulk of the boomers retire, lingering stereotypes of the average senior citizen as a frail and passive creature are already out of date". Digital games are an increasing part of the baby boomers' media consumption pattern. A longitudinal comparison based on the regular US consumer studies from the ESA, demonstrates that 9% of Americans playing digital games in 1999 were over the age of 50, rising to 19% in 2004, to 26% in 2008, and to 29% in 2011. In one of the very few empirical studies focusing on baby boomer gamers, Pearce[2] paints a nuanced picture of a diverse demographic that spends considerable resources (both in terms of time and money) in playing primarily PC-based digital games, with a large proportion of respondents being highly active in online game communities and virtual worlds. Regardless of their gaming preferences, most baby-boomer gamers agreed that there is a considerable lack of attention of the mainstream game industry for their interests. With the notable exception of Nintendo's Brain Training and Wii console games, few games are designed with seniors in mind. As we argued previously[3], digital game design for seniors will need to address more than the accessibility issues that may emerge as a consequence of age-related limitations in perceptual, cognitive, and motor abilities. Importantly, they need to take the experiences that tomorrow's seniors are seeking as a point of departure, and these experiences will be markedly different from the ones sought by today's seniors.

References

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