Response 1 to "Toward a gerontoludic manifesto"

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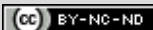
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Abstract

Responses to commentary, "Toward a Gerontoludic Manifesto," by Bob De Schutter and Vero Vanden Abeele in Anthropology & Aging Vol36, no.2, the special issue on "Aging the Technoscape," followed by a reply by the commentary authors.

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> *"[W]hen I play my Gameboy outside of my home I see people looking at me; they think that I have gone crazy"*
> *[A 62-year-old female participant in a study, quoted in "Towards a Gerontoludic Manifesto"]*

This quote, included in Bob De Schutter and Vero Vanden Abeele's call to action, reveals a sense of stigma and embarrassment that some older adults feel when 'outing' themselves as avid video game players. By highlighting the social judgment felt by many older adults, the authors lay the groundwork for critical gaming scholars to develop a 'gerontoludic' approach to how older adults engage with video games. While their manifesto provides a useful strategy for embarking on this academic journey, they acknowledge that their essay marks only the first steps towards developing a deeper comprehension of gerontoludology. Though we learned much from this manifesto, we are taking this opportunity to point out the work that remains to be done, both in terms of content and methodology.

First, by acknowledging the heterogeneity of games and gaming experiences for older adults, we will necessarily reframe their gaming encounters to emphasize a continuum of engagement. De Schutter and Vanden Abeele explicitly want to move beyond dichotomies in their three "adages" (Playfulness over usefulness, Growth over decline, Heterogeneity over stereotyping). However, in the discussion of each, they sometimes reproduce the very dichotomies they criticize. For example, in their arguments about playfulness over usefulness, they advocate for an understanding of play in and of itself as valuable and worthy of examination (i.e., one should value games that are entertaining). The authors seem to imply that games are either playful or useful. Yet, can't a game be both playful and simultaneously serve a useful purpose? Perhaps gaming is sometimes useful, sometimes playful, and, most often, a little bit of both along a spectrum of feeling and thought. Likewise, some games might develop growth, while still productively acknowledging that aging can be accompanied by meaningful experiences of decline. Taking anthropologist Sarah Lamb's discussion of "meaningful decline" to its extreme interpretation, we could imagine residents of "old age homes" in India playing online games that focus on Hindu notions of samsara (the cycle of birth and death) (Lamb 2014). Reframing aging experiences along a continuum will enable us to better see the variety of perspectives and meanings, and to imagine optimum design opportunities.

Second, while De Schutter and colleagues have mentioned it elsewhere (De Schutter, Brown, and Nap 2015), the manifesto overlooks the importance of gaming as self-expression. Video games are a vehicle for creativity. The generative qualities of video games, such as *Football Manager* (where players create and manage their own soccer teams), allow participants to mobilize their imaginations, unique perspectives, and experiential wisdom to express their individual worldviews. While much current research is devoted to investigating how video games may nurture creativity in children and young adults, the role of and need for gaming as self-expression in an older population is largely neglected, and should be included as a fundamental aspect of any gerontoludic practice.

Third, video games offer older adults an opportunity for community. Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), in particular, supply a virtual space for older adults to engage in communal activities, including but not limited to chatting, flirting, forming friendships, and exploring different identities through role playing. Games such as *World of Warcraft* allow players to live in virtual communities, gaining the kind of social interaction they may otherwise lack in their non-digital lives. Additionally, MMOGs permit older adults, who may be disabled or unable to engage in some activities due to changing health conditions, to enjoy pursuits online that would otherwise be impossible in the "real world" (cf. Evett et al. 2011). Any gerontoludic approach must consider how video games foster community and sociality.

Finally, in terms of methodology, De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's manifesto does not distinguish between games for older adults and games for an unspecified age group. However, the authors primarily mention games specifically designed with an older population in mind (whether created to provide health benefits or for parody purposes). We suggest widening what we consider the allowable and "useful" experiences of gaming for older adults to include an expanded menu of gaming. In this manner, we may gain a new understanding of whether older adults find self-expression and communion in their gaming experiences. Such insights will, in turn, be the fodder for designers and developers to adopt creative new approaches.

This manifesto is an especially welcome addition to discussions among professionals who specialize in design for older adults. Design for aging is a field of research and practice that has become increasingly robust in terms of a nuanced sensitivity toward the opportunities presented by our changing global demographics. José Colucci, from the design firm IDEO, offers the following six principles for design for aging.[1] These criteria for guiding the work of people who create products and services for older adults are also aptly suited for those who aspire to generate enabling, fun, and meaningful gaming experiences for the same population:

1. Respect the Individual

2. Ease the Transition

3. Do Not Help More Than Is Required

4. Promote Empathy

5. Encourage Fresh Thinking

6. Promote Connection

These principles urge designers to be sensitive to the range of ways of aging rather than assume a universality of experiences, to avoid over-designing or over-interpreting the role of the designer, and to think beyond the obvious.[2] Videogame designers would do well to abide by

these principles, as they create worlds and experiences that are sensitive to the diversity of aging experiences. Moreover, their gameplay would be less likely to marginalize older adults with underlying assumptions about that audience as feeble, on the one hand, or heroically able-bodied, on the other (cf. Lamb 2014 and Vitols and Lynch 2015).

De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's manifesto is the beginning of an expansion of critical academic studies of aging and game design that also offers the technology industry constructive guidelines on how to approach this new market. As professors in an engineering school, we train students in theories and practices for better design in aging and video gaming, and we join De Schutter and Vanden Abeele in a desire to create a world where there is no stigma in playing a Gameboy for a 62-year-old woman, or for people of any age or demographic background. A first step is to expose our students to the diversity of experiences and aspirations of gamers, and to the diversity of available gaming opportunities.

Notes

1. As presented in Lynch's Engineering for Humanity class at Olin College, February 2015. Quoted with permission.

2. See IDEO's collection of design concepts about aging (which includes some of Colucci's own work) at http://www.designs-on.com/issue/aging/

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