
Ageing Playfully: Advancing Research on Games for Older Adults Beyond Accessibility and Health Benefits

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Abstract

Games for older adults have previously been explored with a focus on improving older adults' well-being by fostering social interaction, and providing cognitive and physical stimulation, suggesting that they are a means of encouraging older adults to *better* themselves and introducing an overly functionalist perspective on play. In this workshop, we aim to shift perspectives on games for older adults on hedonic aspects that extend beyond benefits they provide. We will explore challenges and opportunities in the design and development of games for older adults that primarily focus on entertainment to create empowering and engaging experiences, and we will explore how to consolidate efforts that aim to deliver benefits of games with a purpose beyond entertainment to older adults.

Author Keywords

Older adults; game design; player experience; game accessibility

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General – *Games*.

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Introduction

A growing body of research in Human-Computer Interaction addresses the design, development, and evaluation of games for older adults. The CHI community has previously explored the potential of games to connect older adults with peers and younger generations and peers [9], to provide physical and mental stimulation for older people in long-term care [2], and to deliver effective and engaging therapy and rehabilitation [8]. In this context, games are frequently presented as a means of playfully addressing age-related changes, and an emphasis is placed upon the potential of games to provide value primarily because they extend beyond entertainment [1].

While these perspectives offer valuable insights into potential benefits of games for older adults, the strong focus on games with a purpose beyond entertainment has recently been criticized as it places the focus on *inabilities* of players, suggesting that games may be a means of *fixing* older adults [5]. This is echoed by general debates regarding the problem-centric representation of older adults in the CHI community [10], proposing that technology for older adults should emphasize strengths of the target audience and account for individual preferences and needs, rather than adopting a homogeneous perspective on aging and age-related problems.

In this context, games research exploring play in adulthood and late life has made some efforts to explore older adults' experiences when engaging with games in a more differentiated way (e.g., [3] and [4]), critically reflecting upon benefits and risks of games. However, many of these studies still assume benefits of

play beyond entertainment, rather than regarding play as an inherently valuable activity.

This half-day workshop will move beyond questions of accessibility and therapeutic benefits of games. It will address challenges associated with the practical uptake of games by players throughout adulthood, and will focus on the creation of empowering experiences that are inherently valuable rather than looking at games solely as a tool to better older players.

Goals and Core Questions

In this half-day workshop, we aim to shift perspectives on games beyond aspects relating to their accessibility and potential to provide health benefits for older adults by encouraging participants to explore the research area with no intentional benefits other than entertainment.

In this context, we want to explore the following topic areas and questions:

- What picture of older adults is currently propagated in games research, what are the challenges, and what are the opportunities? How can we create realistic profiles of older adult players?
- What can we learn from previous game design projects addressing older adults, what were the strengths and weaknesses in their design?
- How can we create games that encourage older players to take ownership of their gaming experience, empowering them to actively shape the way they interact with games rather than taking the role of passive consumers?

- How can we balance design efforts that aim to deliver benefits of games with a purpose beyond entertainment to older adults, and consolidate this approach with the idea of playing games purely for entertainment?
- And finally, how should the field prepare itself for the upcoming generations of older adults, which include many individuals who had access to games in their formative years?

To this end, the workshop aims to bring together a multidisciplinary group of participants, including researchers in human-computer interaction, game design, game studies, psychology, and gerontology.

Workshop Outcomes

Through critical reflection and hands-on design, the workshop will outline an older-adult centered roadmap for games research with a focus on providing engaging and empowering player experiences. It will contribute an overview of the state of the art in HCI research addressing games for older adults, and outline challenges and opportunities. It is planned to establish a working group or SIG that continues to discuss issues around games for present and future generations of older players.

Workshop Structure

Before the workshop, the organizers will create a workshop website and circulate the call for papers through HCI and games-related mailing lists. Furthermore, it will identify outlets to reach out to potential interdisciplinary participants (such as the

Gerontoludic Society¹, an international and multidisciplinary association of academics and professionals who study, design or develop playful experiences for older adults).

The workshop will offer two submission categories.

1. Participants with a background in human-computer interaction, game design, and/or games research will be encouraged to submit two-page position papers in SIGCHI Extended Abstracts format addressing at least one of the core questions raised in this paper.
2. Participants with a background in ageing will be asked to submit a maximum of five presentation slides outlining challenges that need to be met by the games research community for games to become a meaningful part of older adults' daily lives.

During the workshop, participants will be invited to engage in two main activities. The first part of the workshop will give participants opportunity for brief, two-minute summaries of their submitted work and their position on games for older adults, and encourage critical reflection upon previous work on games for older adults in HCI to identify gaps that need to be addressed to provide engaging games for older players. The session will conclude with group work leading to the development of a set of three personas describing older adult players. Building upon these results, the second part of the workshop will engage participants in practical design exercises to explore new opportunities

¹ <http://www.gerontoludicsociety.com>

in game development for older adults, identify the most pressing challenges in terms of game design for older adults and player engagement, and further engage with the core questions guiding this workshop. This session will conclude with a reflective session bringing together initial results from the first part of the workshop with design outcomes of the second part, identifying future avenues for researchers and designers exploring games for older adults.

The workshop will be documented throughout, and outcomes will be made available to participants and other interested parties through the website. Additionally, the organizers aim to put together an interdisciplinary special issue on challenges and future opportunities in game development for older adult players.

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