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Games and Culture 2009 4: 27 originally published online 1 December 2008

DOI: 10.1177/1555412008325480

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The Gray Haired Gaming Generation

Findings From an Explorative Interview Study on Older Computer Gamers

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The market for adult computer gamers is growing considerably. However, there are nearly no empirical works that are primarily focusing this age group. Therefore, there is an urgent need for explorative studies on these gamers. In a qualitative in-depth interview study with 21 gamers aged between 35 and 73 years, this article describes their gaming careers, the integration of gaming into their everyday life, and aspects of social interaction within real and virtual life. Overall, the findings of this study sketch a lively picture of adult players. Many of the interviewees show a very strong interest in the social aspects of gaming. However, gaming can put some strain on their family life, and many older gamers feel that their partners and peers regard their hobby as being inappropriate for their age. Still, most of the interview partners successfully manage to combine occupational and private duties with their gaming activities.

Keywords: *adult gamers; gaming careers; everyday game use; social gaming; qualitative interview study*

New Targets: Old Players!

“Attack of the Gaming Grannies” (Hahn, 2005, n.p.) titles *BusinessWeek* online in regard to a group of computer gamers that was nearly invisible in the public discussion so far—elderly gamers. With obvious astonishment, the article

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discovers a “new” target group for game publishers, which is much bigger than expected by the authors. They cite a quota of 19% computer gamers in the group of more than 50-year-olds. The *BusinessWeek* piece goes on to portray a very special 69-year-old computer gaming freak, Barbara St. Hillaire, who is spending 50 hours a week on video gaming. “Old Grandma Hardcore”, which is her gamer tag, is not unknown to computer gaming circles. She’s a game show guest, testing games on MTV overdrive, and her grandson publishes a prospering blog on the unusual life of the old lady (<http://oghc.blogspot.com>).

It is not surprising that such an extraordinary case is chosen when the media comment on older gamers. This is a sign of the surprise regarding a development that has not been in the focus of the journalists for many years—and where one cannot use established categories or frames of reference (see Scheufele & Brosius, 1999). The sudden interest in these *strange* people resembles the anthropological descriptions on natives in foreign countries of the 19th century and early social research on marginalized groups in society. The articles focus the strange, the different, the exotic—although the quoted statistics do not imply scattered deviationists, but a social mass phenomenon, also in the older age groups.

The assumed size of the group notwithstanding, there is not very much knowledge on them so far. Gaming research has focused the adolescent gamer so far, supposedly the biggest user group, which is also the one group that seems to be the most fragile with respect to the effects of brutality and explicit sexuality in computer games. This concentration on the younger gamer lead to a stereotypical description of the computer gamer, also in science, as Griffiths, Davies and Chappel (2004a) note,

Despite the rise of computer games as a leisure phenomenon, there has been relatively little research into this area. A majority of the research to date has concentrated on adolescent game players. Furthermore, most of the research has tended to concentrate on the more negative aspects such as excessive play and addiction, the effects of playing aggressive games, and the medical and psychosocial consequences . . . Thus, the image of a typical gamer (and the pastime of computer gaming) is seen as socially negative and remains firmly within a youth subculture. (p. 81)

Of late, the gaming industry is actively working against this cliché, trying to turn it into a more favorable image of the gamer—away from the idea of computer games being “kid’s toys”. The interest group of the gaming industry, the Entertainment Software Association, claims a much bigger competence by its name, which goes beyond gaming and includes the market for adult entertainment as well. The lobby group also supports studies that underline the seriousness and importance of the gaming market (see Crandall & Sidak, 2006), and they regularly publish user data that imply a much broader group of gamers that extends

well beyond the teens and “twens” (see Entertainment Software Association, 2006; see also Jung von Matt, Electronic Arts, & *GEE Magazin*, 2006, for a study with a similar aim). The reasons for the image campaign are obvious. The adult market seems to offer ample gaming groups (see Crandall & Sidak, 2006; Müller-Lietzkow, Bouncken, & Seufert, 2006), and this market is not subject to a limiting legislation, in contrast to the youth market, which is heavily regulated in many countries. So the gaming industry certainly has a lot of (economic) interest in pushing the adult gaming market.

Given the growing importance of the adult gaming market, we believe that there is some urgent need for an independent research on older computer gamers. For example, some basic questions still have to be answered. Who are these players, what are their motivations to play games, what are their specifics, and can we discern different groups and types of older gamers? Especially the last question cannot be answered solely empirically, though. As a researcher, one has to decide who is regarded to be an “older gamer”—which is based on the observer’s standpoint. In the above-mentioned perspective that models computer gaming as a part of youth culture, an older player is maybe an older adolescent, and from the viewpoint of adolescent gamers, probably every adult gamer is “old”.

This piece focuses on a different—and smaller—group, though. We focus on gamers who were born too early to be socialized with video and computer games during their youth. They form a much different group from the younger age groups, because they learned the use of the new medium when they were already grown up, partially being taught by their children and grandchildren—so we believe that they are a somewhat “coherent” group in this basic characteristic, that certainly needs and allows for a specific and independent research. The main biographic key phases for these groups might be (a) the first video gaming boom, initiated by the Atari VCS 2600 at the end of the 1970s and (b) the advent of the home computer in the first half of the 1980s. People who have finished their adolescent socialization at this point of time, cannot be counted as being part of the “Generation Atari” or the “Generation C64” who were basically brought up with these machines. Therefore, one can draw a line at an age range of approximately 35 to 40 years (at this point of time, in the year 2008). For the 1970s cohorts and later, consoles and home computers became quickly part of the media repertoire; not so for the older generation.

Our study will solely focus this group (in our home country, Germany) and it tries to give a first impression on who these people are, what specifics differentiate them from the younger ones, and how they include computer gaming in their everyday life and biography. It is an exploratory *first approach* in nature, which can be attributed to the lack of studies in this field. That said, we will integrate our study in the discussion on computer gaming, and we will discuss the—rather limited—status quo of studies on older gamers in the following section. Based on this, we will explain the design of our study in the subsequent section, followed

by a discussion of the central findings and a critical discussion. In the final section, we provide some ideas for further research in the field.

Literature Overview: Computer Game Use of (Older) Adults

As mentioned, communication studies are predominantly interested in younger computer and video gamers. This is also true for studies that are not explicitly focusing on the respective age groups—for example, studies interested in general effects, like the ones attributed to the use of brutal content—but that rely on self selected online samples on the basis of fan forums (e.g., Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2006). Here, the average age of the gamers is usually very low, probably not representing the true average age of the whole user group. If one is interested in effects differences, based on an experimental design, this age bias might not be a central problem (see Carnagey & Anderson, 2005; Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006); however, one cannot get a sound impression of the composition of the whole user group.

There are some use data on older computer gamers available, though, from the market analysis of the computer gaming industry and representative media use studies that include computer gaming as a use form. The results of these mostly quantitative–descriptive studies are consistent—the share of older gamers is higher than implied by the public discussion, both absolute (with regard to the whole population) and relative (with regard to the share of gamers in the respective age group).

For our home country, Germany, this can be exemplified by the “Allensbacher Computer- und Technikanalyse” (Allensbach Computer and Technology Analysis, a study by a media and market research institute). This study, which is representative for the German population aged between 14 and 64 years (50.12 million people), contains items on computer gaming use and is partially available to the public (e.g., via <http://media.spiegel.de>). Via secondary analysis, we extracted the share of gamers in the German society, and the findings are surprising. In absolute numbers, the group of players between 30 and 39 years is the biggest one, with 4.14 million users, followed by the 20- to 29-year-olds (4.05 million), and the 14- to 19-year-olds (3.67 million). Even in the group of the 40- to 49-year-olds, there are 3.54 million people saying that they have already used their computer for gaming, and in the group of the 50- to 59-year-olds, we find 2 million of these people. Only in the “oldest” age group, the 60- to 64-year-olds, one can merely identify a low number of users (800,000). These findings have to be qualified, though,

- The age groups have a differing size, which can be partially attributed to the varying age spans of the groups (5 years in the youngest and oldest group,

10 years in the other groups) and a general difference of the age groups' share of the whole society. The group of the 14- to 19-year-olds is much smaller than the other groups (5.12 million people, in contrast to the biggest group, the 40- to 49-year-olds, which has a size of 11.84 million people). When taking this into account and looking at the relative share of computer games within these groups, we get different results: In the youngest group, there are 72% gamers, 51% in the age group of the 20- to 29-year-olds, 40% in the group of the 30- to 39-year-olds, 30% in the group of the 40- to 49-year-olds, 21% in the group of the 50- to 59-year-olds, and 15% in the group of the 60- to 64-year-olds. So the share of gamers is considerably shrinking in the older the groups.

- Furthermore, in this study all individuals were included who said that they used the computer for “gaming”—without specifying the genre and type of game (so this might be a Flash Game, Solitaire, World of Warcraft, or Counter-Strike—whatever the user counts as *gaming*).
- The above numbers also include persons with infrequent use and minimal gaming practice. When asking for “experienced” players, the numbers changed considerably. The biggest group were the 14 to 19 years old experienced players (2.86 million). Still, most other age groups do contain more than 2 million experienced players. Even in the group of the 50- to 59-year-olds, there are nearly 1 million *experienced* players. In the oldest group, there are just about 400,000.

Now one could attribute these surprising findings to the problems of a secondary analysis or the definition of *gaming* (as a self-defined concept). However, similar studies (like the German Allbus) show comparable trends. And international findings support the German data as well. The British BBC Study “Gamers in the UK” even shows bigger relative numbers than the German study. “This research returned the result that 59% of 6 to 65 year olds in the UK are gamers. In total, there are 26.5 million gamers in the UK.” And “. . . the penetration of gaming is very high between the ages of 6 and 24, and although it drops off after that, still over half of 36-50 year olds in the UK are gamers” (Pratchett, 2005). For the United States, the already mentioned study of the Entertainment Software Association (2006) yields the following results: “69% of American heads of households play computer or video games. The average game player age is 33.” The age distribution is also interesting: “31, 0% under 18 years, 44% 18-49 years, 25.0% 50+ years.”

So one can sum up these general findings as follows: Computer gaming is not just “for kids”—it is also entertainment for adults. Even in the age groups that did not grow up with gaming, we find considerable number of gamers.

However, there are virtually no studies on the specifics of older gamers. Griffiths et al. (2003, 2004a, 2004b) published a series of studies focusing on online gamers. In their studies, they try to break up the *stereotype* (Griffiths et al., 2003) of the young, male gamers. For example, they realized an online survey among the forum visitors of two Everquest fan sites (Griffiths et al., 2004a,

2004b). The age mean is 28 years (Griffiths et al., 2004a, p. 479), but they found adult players between 20 and 70 years in their studies (Griffiths et al., 2004b, p. 89). The findings of these studies imply a number of differences between the older Everquest gamers and the younger ones—for example, in their gaming biography, the frequency of game use, the individual expectations, and the everyday integration of the gaming. It seems especially noteworthy that the social aspects of gaming are more important for the adults (Griffiths et al., 2004b, p. 93) than for adolescents, and the older players seem to reject brutal games more often. Furthermore, the adult players sacrifice a part of their social life for Everquest, whereas the adolescents save the time for gaming by investing less time into school/college and work. So the authors of the study fear, “If this is a true reflection of what is sacrificed, then there is some cause for concern for the adolescent group as the sacrificing of education or work may have more severe repercussions than sacrificing other parts of their lives” (Griffiths et al., 2004b, p. 95). Although the studies by Griffiths et al. give us some impression of the differences between young and grown-up Everquest players, they cannot easily be transferred to other groups due to their concentration on a specific game and self-selected forum audiences. Furthermore, there is no segmentation of the older players in the named studies, all players aged more than 28 years (Griffiths et al., 2004b, p. 91) are aggregated into one group—thus, a more precise identification of (sub)groups is not possible.

So overall, we have to note that it is difficult to get more information on older computer gamers beyond basic (sociodemographic) data. That said, the available data suggests that the group is much bigger than expected (when judging on the basis of the public discussion). Therefore, more research is needed, and this is where our study starts. Our aim is to describe the integration of computer gaming into the lives of older gamers, their everyday use and experiences, and some common problems when playing as an older adult in more detail, based on a qualitative interview study of 21 computer gamers more than 35 years of age.

Method: Design, Planning, and Realization of the Study

Research Interest

As described earlier in the article, some very basic *first* questions have not been answered yet. We collected and filtered these questions, both from the literature (or to be more precise, the literature’s desiderata) and our (research) experience in the field, resulting in some guiding questions representing our main research interests. We organized these questions according to a general process logic, from the start of the gaming biography, over the first adaptation phase, to the development of the gaming career.

- Why and based on which events did the older players start their computer gaming career?
- How did they acquire the knowledge and skills to successfully play computer games?
- How do they adapt to the requirements of the games, and how do they integrate the games into their everyday life?
- How do gaming and genre preferences change over time, and which social factors (like family and job requirements) do influence this?

Implicitly, all these questions also hint at a comparison with the wealth of findings on children's and adolescents' gaming. Moreover, if the older players are different from the younger group, it is also important to see how these two groups interact, so we also added questions regarding the social interaction of computer gamers in multiplayer environments as well as questions on the real life interaction with kids and families, peers, and other persons.

Design

When analyzing phenomena that have not been in the focus of research, an explorative design (see Lindlof, 1995) is necessary. In the present study, this has been realized in the form of an explorative, guided interview. The target group of the interviews was the players aged 35 years and older, as explained earlier.

The research instrument is divided into two parts: an introductory section with mainly "closed" items, and a structured, but open interview guide containing "key questions" based on the aforementioned research interest. Demographic information such as age, gender, education, job, and income were collected with the help of the standardized questionnaire. It included also some items on the perceived importance and intensity of media use (including newspapers, TV, Internet, etc.), to get a complete picture on the relevance of computer gaming in relation to other spare-time activities. That said, the closed items were smoothly integrated into the flow of the questions, and both closed items as well as the open part formed a seamless interview situation. Because all the interviews were done face-to-face, the interviewers could directly react on the answers of the gamers, so the interviews could develop dynamically.

Research questions focusing on the connections between social environment and gamer, careers were integrated in the interview in the form of partially structured items; this part of the interview had a narrative character (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), and the interview partners could freely describe their (gaming) biography, starting with the childhood, growing up, and various phases of adulthood. The interviewers focused on the key events that influenced the media use habits, such as the first experiences with computers and computer gaming, developments in the private or occupational field, such as getting a university diploma, marrying, or change of the place of residence.

Another part of the interview guide included key questions on the everyday integration of computer gaming, the implementation in the social life of the users, the interaction during (online) gaming sessions as well as the development of knowledge and skills during the gaming careers.

Last but not least, based on the individual interview situations, ad hoc questions were added if necessary—for example, on the topic of in-game communication if the gamers were part of online gaming communities like “guilds” or “clans”.

The interviews were then analyzed on the basis of a qualitative content analysis (according to Mayring, 2002). The material has been structured and condensed in several steps, while retaining the information depth of the material by keeping central key statements and anchor examples. The aim of such an analysis is a higher degree of abstraction to extract recurring patterns and typologies.

Sample and Interview Settings

The 21 participants (and 2 participants of a pretest) were selected on the basis of their age and gaming experience. Contact was made through various channels (personal networks, Internet sites, Internet cafes, in-game waiting rooms, etc.) to get a broad selection of persons. Access and selection was difficult—from our impression during the recruiting phase, older gamers obviously were not using Internet forums as often as the younger ones, and they did not openly exhibit or admit their hobby to others. We suspect that the older gamers very often feel that playing computer games is regarded as being socially deviant from the general expectations regarding their age groups, and some might even feel ashamed of this nonstandard hobby that is not part of the general role model. Nevertheless (or maybe even because of that situation), the interview settings can be described as open and relaxed in every single case. The interviews were done in a private environment without time restrictions and as face-to-face interviews without the copresence of peers or family (to prevent socially desired answers). All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed later on.

On the basis of the described selection process, we achieved a very big age span between 35 and 73 years. Three of the gamers interviewed were already retired, one is looking for a job, and another is still studying. The other participants were working in a full-time job. Five of the gamers were living without a partner, 11 were married and had at least one child. The interviewed persons showed an above-average educational level, with many of them holding a university degree. All of them play at home on their PC, mostly in a separate work or hobby room. Their individual gaming experience was between 5 and 27 years, with an average of approximately 18 years. Half of our sample preferred online role-playing games like *Diablo* or *World of Warcraft*, the rest were mainly playing offline games. Clearly, our sample is dominated by male players; however,

this reflects the imbalanced gender distribution especially in the older age groups. It is also interesting to note that a lot of the interviewed gamers do have a job in the information and communication industries (like software developers or system administrators). Nearly half of the interviewed persons were working in the respective field. Again, this is not a result of an imbalanced recruiting process, but due to the imbalance in the population: players from other occupational fields were much harder to find. Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewed persons and their gaming profiles (all names have been changed to guarantee anonymity).

Findings

In the following sections, we will present the main findings of this analysis: First, we will sketch the gaming careers, then the everyday integration and use of games, and finally aspects of social interaction through gaming. Examples and individual statements will be added to give some in-depth impression of the everyday experience that lies behind the more general and abstract trends described below.

Gamer “Careers”

The first part of the research questions focused on the relations between significant events (like the first contact with computer gaming) and the effects on spare time behavior in general, media use in particular, and the related social implications. Overall, we found that the dominant spare-time activity until the end of the school time was simply “meeting friends” as well as sports (mostly organized in clubs)—in this respect, nearly all the interviewed persons gave similar answers. When it came to the first experience with computer technology, though, there were obvious differences between *two larger age groups*, namely the group of the 35- to 50-year-olds and the ones more than 50 years of age.

The *younger interviewees* made their first experiences with computers during their mid/late teens or early “twens” with peers. In some cases, friends owned programmable pocket calculators or home computers (or had access via older siblings). The home computers of the first generation like the Sinclair Spectrum ZX 81 or the Commodore VC 20 did not offer the technical requirements, especially graphics capabilities and input devices, to render them as being (primarily) *gaming* machines. The interviewees who developed interest in computers during that era usually started to write their own programs or copied them from listings in computer magazines like *Chip*. These persons told us in the interviews that their primary interest was not the gaming experience, but learning a computer

Table 1
Gamer Profiles: Overview

Name	Age	Gender	Short Description (Family/Job)	Family With Children	Computer Gaming's Share of Spare Time (%)	IT Veteran	Organizer	Indi-vidualist	Heavy User	Frequent User	Occasional Player	Online	Gaming Experience (Years)	Role Playing Games	Action / Adventure	Strategy / Simulation
Alexander	35	m	Living with partner, no children, university degree (medicine)		5			x			x		16		x	①
Cedric	36	m	With partner, 2 children (6, 7) who do not live in the household, no higher education, looking for a job		35			x		x			17		x	①
Charlieh	38	m	Single, living without partner, 1 child in the household, no higher education, challenged education, challenged person (wheelchair)		100				x			x	18	x		
Daisy	73	w	Widow, 7 children, former social education worker	x	10						x		5			①
Frank	45	m	Married, 4 children (13, 15, 18, 24), entrepreneur, IT industry	x	70	x	x		x			x	20	①	x	①
Gary	58	m	Married, child (28), teacher (primary school)	x	25					x		x	27	①		
Henry	56	m	Married, 2 children (22, 24), employee in the IT business	x	70				x				25	x		①

John	43	m	Married, 2 children (partner and children live in another country)	65	x	x	x	x	x	24	x	x
Juri	36	m	Single, university degree (management), project leader in the mining industry	50		x	x			7	x	①
Marcus	46	m	Married, without chil- dren, degree in eco- nomics, clan leader	70	x	x	x			24	x	
Maria	68	w	Married, 4 children (38-48), training in a book store, retired	15	x			x		5		①
Nicolas	55	m	Married, 2 children (22, 33), diploma (engineering), energy sector, early retirement	50	x	(x)	x			16	x	
Norman	37	m	With partner, no children, freelancer in the IT business	70	x	(x)	x			22	①	x
Owen	49	m	Married, 2 children (13, 15), employee IT	10	x		x		x	25		①
Peter	35	m	Single, without partner, no children, employee IT	25	x	x	x			17	①	x
Ralph	41	m	Married, 2 children (11, 14), employee/ bank	55	x	(x)	x			19	①	x
Steven	36	m	Single, no children. university degree, system administrator	25	x			x		18	x	x

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Age	Gender	Short Description (Family/Job)	Family With Children	Computer Gaming's Share of Spare Time (%)	IT Veteran	Indi-vidualist Organizer	Heavy User	Frequent User	Occasional Player	Online	Gaming Experience (Years)	Role Playing Games	Action / Adventure	Strategy / Simulation
Stewart	36	m	With partner, without children, no higher education, employee		n.a.							20			x
Thomas	36	m	Married, 2 children (1, 3), working in the IT sector	x	20	x			x		x	23	x	⊕	
Wayne	38	m	Married, 1 child (1), computer scientist (working in the pharmaceuticals industry), actively involved in a forum for older players	x	70	x	x	x			x	14		⊕	x
Winston	44	m	Married, 2 children (14, 16), early retirement	x	50			x				20			x

NOTE: IT = information technology; n.a. = not available; m = male; w = female. Family job: x = existing characteristic, (x) = tendency in the respective direction. Individualists = persons who do not need dense social networks and seem to appreciate their personal freedom. Gaming experience (in years) = starting with the first contact with a computer game, up to the date of the interview. Genres (role playing games, action games, strategy games): ⊕ = was a user before or is using this type of game very infrequently now; x = active/frequent user.

language and gaining a deeper understanding of the computer technology. A functional game was just representing the successful programming behind it. Norman, a 37-year-old information technology (IT) specialist, got his first computer at the age of 15 and remembers that phase,

I had a VC20, that was some when in the middle of the 80s . . . I wrote programs mainly, sometimes I also played games . . . I am also an engineer, as a job, so I have a technology affinity. I was fascinated that I could influence the machine to do what I want . . . My first game was something self programmed. I wrote some kind of Pong I had seen this on television, this tennis game, where the ball is flying back and forward. I programmed that myself, not according to a 'listing'—it wasn't really difficult. The game was nice, but relatively unimportant when compared to the process of learning what you can do with that thing (the computer). (Interview Norman)

Similar statements were made by other interviewees in that age group as well. In the biographies of this group, the early playful use of technology in the home computer era often leads to a career in the IT business later on. So the contact with professional computer games did not radically change the spare-time habits of these people—the computer already had a very high importance for these people, both in the spare time and in their professional careers.

The *older interviewees* (> 50 years of age) show two different patterns of a first contact with gaming and computer technology. Some of these persons were introduced to computers as a *part of their job*. Mainframe computers are a part of both business and research since the 1950s, so they were already part of the lives of many adults, even in the oldest age groups. Henry, who is 56 years old, is working in the IT department of a large chemical and pharmaceuticals company, and there, he made his first experiences with computer games,

I made my first contact with a PC in 1981, at work. I wrote BASIC programs there, also little games like Marslander that I typed out of 'listings'. I worked on mainframe computers at that time, and the graphics were still monochrome. (Interview Henry)

Another group of people aged more than 50 years were introduced to computer technology *by the children's generation*. In some cases, the children received the PC as a present, and the parents learned to use the computer together with their children, in other cases, the parents "inherited" old PCs of their children, that often had computer games installed. The 73-year-old Daisy described her gaming initiation as follows:

It was Christmas (2001) and I got an electronic advent calendar. Everyday was a surprise—and there were games in it as well. That was fantastic! . . . (So) Actually, I started with games that were pre-installed on the computer. (Interview Daisy)

In rare cases, there is also a third trigger for a computer gaming career—*life-changing events* like illnesses. We found two cases where the computer gaming was partially a result of a serious illness that also meant some loss of control and immobility; however, this pattern is not specific to older players, but can happen in all age groups.

Life-changing events that considerably influence the media-use habits are the exception, though. *Changes* are taking place *on a larger time scale*. In many biographies, there are growing occupational loads and social obligations after the phase of (higher) education and job training resulting in less spare time. So, most adults are facing growing problems when trying to integrate time-consuming computer gaming into their everyday routines. It does not come as a surprise that massive multiplayer online role-playing games (so-called MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft seem to cannibalize the use of other media and computer games, due to their high demand of spare time. If the interviewees are playing this type of games, there is simply not enough time for many other things. However, unlike in younger groups, the personal and occupational constraints are high and mostly inflexible. Therefore, very often, the gaming also takes place in organized settings. Some of the gamers noted that they set themselves a time limit on gaming or move the gaming time into fixed timeslots (very often in the night), so that they can coordinate occupational, private, and gaming duties. For example, 68-year-old Maria describes her everyday computer game use as follows: “I am an absolute night person. When my husband’s sleeping, I am sitting in front of the computer. On the weekends, my grandchildren visit me very often, and with them, I am also playing on the afternoons” (Interview Maria).

Looking at the long-time development of the computer game use of the interviewees, we find that the genre preferences remain relatively stable, without much influence by the biographic orientation horizon of the users. Even gamers with hundreds of played games and many years of gaming experience do not change their preferences very much, despite technological changes (like the development of photo realistic, three dimensional graphics), genre innovations, and the impact of online gaming. Just in one case, a player radically altered his gaming preferences. The interviewee Norman changed to action-oriented MMORPGs like World of Warcraft 2 years ago; before, he tried to avoid such games due to his technology-oriented, “intellectual lifestyle” (interview Norman).

On the basis of the interview results, we can also conclude that certain *expectation patterns* of the gamers (like fun, entertainment, intellectual challenges, experimentation) can just be fulfilled by certain genres. Some genres seem to be incompatible, though, as they are not combined to fulfill all expectations at once. For example, many older computer gamers are playing first person shooters or role playing games, but we rarely found gamers who like both genres and their specifics alike. Interestingly, there seems to be one exception to the rule: the users of World of Warcraft say that they like the mixture of elements that seem

to come from action, adventure, and role playing genres. Obviously, World of Warcraft achieves to unite the positive gratifications of these genres without incorporating elements that lead to a refusal of the game; there seems to be something for everybody in the game, but it is up to the players to choose, therefore they can avoid elements that they might not like.

Computer Gaming in the Social Life of the Users

The *social acceptance* of computer gaming as a hobby for older gamers is still low—as described above, the activity is not seen as being appropriate for that age group. Potential *conflicts* arise from computer gaming during the time that could be used productively; furthermore, life partners who do not have gaming experience cannot fully comprehend the pleasures of the gaming experience (according to the interviewees' statements).

Similar problems were picked out as a central topic by many of the interviewed persons. Most partners seem to tolerate computer gaming as a hobby, which does not necessarily mean that they like it. There are many statements that hint at frustration or even resignation on the partner's side. They probably would like to use the "lost time" for a conversation with the partner after work or other spare-time activities in the "real life," according to the interviewees. Ralph, a 41-year-old bank employee is a World of Warcraft player, and he describes the reactions of his partner as follows, "My wife doesn't like it (the gaming) very much, sometimes. Because time's lost then. I am sitting in front of the PC alone, and this (time) is missing somehow, for blathering, watching TV together, and such things" (Interview Ralph). However, the potential for conflict does not necessarily lead to open arguments, as the two times father and husband Thomas explains,

A long as it (the gaming) does not interfere with the daily routine—which means, my wife asking me to do something or expecting something from me while I am playing a computer game—it is not really a problem. I guess the acceptance of computer gaming amongst women is overall relatively small. Well, and sometimes, she says, yeah: "What a crap!" Her understanding for gaming is very small, but in the end, it doesn't matter. We don't have a row with each other because of computer gaming. (Interview Thomas)

Especially gamers with families put their gaming phases into the late evening and night hours to *avoid conflicts* of interest and stress *with the partner*. So time-based and social reasons go hand in hand here. Ralph explains the constraints, and why he has to control playing World of Warcraft.

I take care that it (the gaming) doesn't take too long. During the week, I have to get up early, half past six. And I also need some sleep! On the weekends, it depends on

our (the family's) plans. If we go on a trip, then there's no gaming. Sometimes, on the afternoons or in the evenings, if there's nothing else happening, then one can sit there and keep at it. (Interview Ralph)

From the viewpoint of the children in the families, the gaming hobby of the parents seems to be greeted, though, much in contrast to the life partners. Obviously, the *gaming seems to build some common ground for the generations*, and it is also perceived as being unusual and cool. Some (grand)children also see a positive effect on the technological *literacy* and mental fitness of their (grand)parents; especially the oldest interviewees very often mentioned that their (grand) children are proud of them. Several of the interviewees also play with their children. The gaming veteran Henry, who has a separate study with two computers, remembers, "I was playing with my son there. We were sitting back to back and playing with each other via LAN" (Interview Henry). Owen, who is 49 years old, says that he even has to "cool down" his children's enthusiasm. And Frank, a family father of four children—and a heavy gamer at the same time—actually asked his sons to play his character in an online strategy game during the day, when he was away working. Some family tension arises from this shared interest of father and children. Frank's wife tries to sanction the children's playing behavior, but obviously, the father's role model is not helpful here—"she has given up," he adds.

In peer groups (including friends, acquaintances, and colleagues), games are only discussed with the like-minded. Some interviewees also experienced condescending statements against them that implied their behavior and hobby is not appropriate for a grown-up, like "gaming in your age—that's childish." In many cases, there is a huge gap of understanding what computer gaming means between the gamers and their nongaming peers, as Frank describes,

I know most of my friends from sports, and they simply cannot comprehend it (the gaming). It's more like (next sentence with an ironic voice): "I got me this Sudoku, isn't that a fantastic game?" Or: "Yeah, I also played Minesweeper for some minutes once." They are mostly on this level. These are separate circles of persons, the clan members or people you meet once in a while during your game sessions . . . and your nonvirtual friends. (Interview Frank)

The elderly gamers in the sample experienced an even more extreme lack of understanding among friends and acquaintances. Persons in their age usually do have little first-hand experience with computer and computer games. The 73-year-old former social-education worker Daisy notes,

I cannot talk to my acquaintances about gaming. None of them is playing computer games . . . I have former fellow students and colleagues, and none of them has a computer. We all reach 80 or 90 years nowadays, and it is ridiculous that one is always depending on one's grandchildren then!

Social Interaction in Virtual Life

Of the interviewees, 10 gathered some experiences in guilds and clans of online games, so they were regularly playing together with other computer gamers in organized groups. Most of the people they meet there are younger. So the interaction with younger players has been an important topic in the interviews.

The findings sketch a partially contradictory picture here. The biological age, the origins, and the background of the players is deemed as being *of no importance* by the interviewees. At the first glance, the enthusiasm for a game like World of Warcraft already generates a high level of similarity which helps to level off some of the differences. For a successful understanding among the players, a similar interest in gaming and game genres seems to be the most important requirement.

That said, some of the *age-specific differences* remain, and if asked specifically for these differences, the older players can name them in detail. In the perspective of many interviewees, the younger players are primarily interested in performance and competition, they show a lower level of emotional stability, their language and behavior are not appropriate, they are careless, they are determined to solve problems by hour or day long *raids*, they are not playing with efficient tactics, and they become more easily addicted to gaming. Some typical statements are,

I have no barriers to younger players, although they are easily detectable by their language and behavior. They are irritated much faster, they are hot-headed and primarily interested in the own gaming achievements. (Interview Henry)

It is important what kind of gamers play (the online games). I once landed on a game where I felt like in a kindergarten. I shut down the computer and that was it. It should be civilized and one should deal with each other in a sensible way. (Interview Marcus)

The number of people that are getting on your nerves is higher amongst the young ones. (Interview Frank)

The older gamers place a special emphasis on *social contacts*, such as negotiating the game's objectives, mutual help during the game, sharing found objects, chatting about everyday topics during the game sessions, and most of them do not believe that younger players share these interests. Obviously, the ambition to advance quickly in the game's ranking is not as pronounced in the older group, which is probably the reason for the formation of independent guilds and clans for older players (e.g., <http://www.die-alten.de>). Many interviewees also oppose brutal, antisocial content, so many games that are only suitable for adults are most likely not played by the adults (but by younger players).

The social contacts through virtual life can develop into *social relationships*, even in real life, as many of the older gamers point out. The interviewee Henry explains this social side of gaming, thus,

I regularly visit (real life) meetings of my main forum. Games are certainly a topic there, but the main importance lies in meeting other players. I think that the quality of social contacts from the internet can be equal to real life contacts, also in intimacy, depth, and stability. I know cases where a life partner of a player became a member of in-game guilds or where virtual acquaintances became real life partners. (Interview Henry)

Marcus, a 46-year-old businessman without children, is involved in organizing and leading gaming groups, both in the game world and the real world. He describes his passion for gaming and the interaction with other players as follows.

I play 2 to 3 hours a day. On the weekends . . . well, I am a clan member, so it's more . . . I am also a guild leader. The players are between 20 and 37 years old. I am a very curious person. If young people have a sound attitude to life, I would like to learn more about this person. It may be the case that people in my age are nuts. So I decide later on, whether I would like to interact with these people or not . . . From time to time, I organize a party at home. All of my group members get an invitation. Certainly, you get to know people this way. (Interview Marcus)

It is a common idea that gaming is isolating people from their social environment, but for the older players in our sample, we don't find strong support for this. Although, undeniably, gaming is a time-consuming hobby that is not shared by many life partners in our sample, most of our interviewees seem to be tightly integrated into dense social networks—some of these networks actually being knit through gaming experiences.

Discussion

This article analyzed a neglected group of computer gamers—the generation “35 plus”. Based on an explorative interview study, it reveals a number of surprising aspects of this group's computer game use.

For example, one would suspect that the time budget spent on computer gaming is shrinking with growing occupational and social demands as well as the involvement and interest in this hobby. However, when we relate the gaming time to the overall spare time, we can find older hardcore gamers who spend a considerable percentage of their time on gaming. Obviously they learned to

combine gaming with occupational and family interests. Naturally, we also find absolute casual players in the generation “35 plus”, who do not value this hobby as really important. There is one common problem that unites nearly all these older gamers (but that is more pronounced in the group of the hardcore players). Their hobby is not deemed as being appropriate for their age, resulting in a lack of understanding, and even condescending statements by peers. The partners of the interviewees accept the gaming, however, they usually do not share their interest, and in some cases they even regard it as being a *waste of time*, resulting in conflicts or at least a potential for conflict.

However, some younger people, especially children and grandchildren of the interviewees, see the older players in a positive light. First, they believe that activities with a computer are healthy for the mental abilities especially of the senior players and second, they regard older players as being *cool*. The more positive tone notwithstanding, this is still an attribution which is based on the same idea of gaming and older players—that it is outside the norm.

On the basis of the explorative study, some aspects of computer gaming were brought into the light; nevertheless, a lot of aspects still remain in the dark. What surprised us to a certain extent is the (overall) strong refusal of brutal content and the equally strong interest in social aspects of gaming of many interviewees. There are various factors that might be influential here: the overall satisfaction with life, reaching career goals, social recognition, changing values due to experiences in partnership and family. Also incidents like divorces, the loss of a partner, retirement, or the departure of children from the parental house might be a reason for the wish for a compensatory social orientation. However, more research is necessary here to differentiate major from minor factors. This is also true for the question why genre preferences remain stable and mostly independent from the individual playing history and technical innovations.

Certainly, there are many more questions—and the research regarding this group will be more important in the future. Our study has shown that many players who started their gaming hobby a long time ago continue to play computer games, even when the basic conditions in their biographies are changing. So it is highly likely that the number of older and senior players will be growing through cohort shifting. When taking the high penetration rates in the young generation into account, it is to be expected that with the aging process of these groups, computer gaming will become a pretty normal spare-time activity of adults, and finally, also the senior citizens.

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