

## Beyond the silver gamer: The compromises and strategies of older video game players

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### Abstract

The experience of older adults who play video games illustrates the contemporary challenges of ageing and the strategies that ageing individuals set up to navigate them. The ethnography of a video game workshop dedicated to older adults in a French cultural centre offers an opportunity to examine how a group of 15 women aged 60–82 years exert their agency as technogenarians (Joyce & Loe 2011). In order to fully engage in their play, the workshop's participants have to manage complex and sometimes contradictory expectations concerning who counts as a player and what is an acceptable way to play. They cobble together available discursive resources to manoeuvre around notions that interfere with their practice. The result is a distinctive play style through which the participants reclaim a right to subvert expectations and, at long last, play.

Keywords: technogenarians, silver gamers, successful ageing, video games, ICT, play.

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## Introduction: Technogenarians and Video Games

“Alien-killer seniors!,” “At seventy, they discover video games: ‘Down! Jump! Come on, jump!’,” “Video Games: Retired people say Wii!”: over the past decade, pun-heavy headlines about “silver gamers” have proliferated in the French media. They echo the growing interest of medical professionals, policymakers and industry players for older adults who play video games. In that coverage, the prevailing perspective frames older adults’ play as a strategy to combat age-related health issues. In line with the scientific literature on older adults and video games, the media coverage of “silver gamers” portrays older adults “as a particular vulnerable group whom society should try to maintain through the use of technology in order to keep the costs of medical treatment and care down” (Iversen 2014: 6).

The situation of older adults who play video games illustrates the contemporary challenges and contradictions of ageing. It sheds light not only on the injunction to active, healthy and successful ageing but also on older adults’ complex and rich relationship with technology. From land-line phones and walking aids to brain training games and home automation systems, technological devices shape the experience of ageing: they assign a certain identity (old, frail, in need of supervision) to individuals, they facilitate surveillance and external intervention and they restrict the scope of possible actions and interactions (Domínguez-Rué & Nierling 2016; Katz 1996). However, older adults do not merely endure technology: as technogenarians, “[e]lders creatively utilise technological artefacts to make them more suitable for their needs even in the face of technological design and availability constraints” (Joyce & Loe 2011: 1).

The study of a video game workshop dedicated to older adults in a French cultural centre constitutes an opportunity to examine how a group of 15 women aged 60–82 years exert their agency in this context. Using ethnographic data collected during the 2014–2015 season of the workshop, including overt and non-participant observation of the 15 participants and semi-directive, biographical interviews with 9 participants, this article explores how older adults negotiate their relationship with video games in order to manage age-related expectations and representations.

The present article argues that playing video games in old age is challenging because older individuals cannot comfortably inhabit the

category of “gamer.” Indeed, different sets of discourses on ageing and video games are at odds: successful ageing intersects with techno-optimism but clashes with the widespread understanding of old age as decline and moral panics about new media. These discursive tensions lead to contradictory expectations and limited possibilities for older players, who manage the situation by devising their own way of playing and talking about video games.

The analysis examines three aspects where specific discourses and practices interact to shape the experience of older video game players. Firstly, debates about the dangers of video games shape older adults’ play. Participants in the workshop manage the tension between the moral panics of the 1990s and recent efforts to rehabilitate video games by setting up a distinction between deviant games and play and good games and play. Secondly, older adults contend with the discrepancy between their identity and the figure of the “gamer.” To counter the association of video games with youth and masculinity, which fuels a sense of incongruity, participants argue that their age and gender guarantee a good-natured and harmless practice of video games. Thirdly, the high value placed on instrumental and productive play shapes older adults’ perception of video games. The category of “silver gamer” itself is problematic for older adults who play games: it does constitute a useful discursive resource to justify their play but it also constrains and disciplines their practice. Overall, participants compromise with notions that video games are dangerous, inappropriate or instrumental in order to design a way to play video games that is both acceptable and enjoyable for them.

### Theoretical Frame: A Critical Perspective on “Silver Gamers”

The present study is situated in the broader field of ageing and technology studies. It engages with critical studies that interrogate the disciplinary dimension of technology for older adults. The research draws on paradigms steeped in the social sciences that examine the uses and representations of technology in old age, as well as the social dynamics and power relations that they materialise (Östlund 2004). It is based on the emerging field of research on older adults and video games, a topic that remains understudied, particularly in a social and critical perspective.

The theoretical framework and methodology of this study find their inspiration in Hacking's call to study what happens "between discourse in the abstract and face-to-face interaction" (Hacking 2004). Drawing on the respective work of Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault on psychiatric asylums, which illustrate that categories are not merely descriptive but shape people by defining the possibilities and meanings available to them, Hacking analyses the "looping effect" through which individuals transform the categories that shape them. To make this looping effect visible, Hacking calls for a model that brings together Goffman's focus on the ways in which institutions label individuals through interactions and material conditions and Foucault's study of the genealogy and transformations of disciplinary discourses. In the case of older adults and video games, Hacking's model proves particularly fruitful: it drives the analysis to take into account not only the various discourses at play and their contradictions but also how these contradictions play out in practice and what that means for older adults' play in a very concrete and practical sense.

The combination of Hacking's model and the ethnographic approach has yielded a wealth of empirical data. The cross-analysis of data collected through interviews, observations and discourse analysis provides a nuanced picture of older technology users' practices. It enriches the collection of in-depth case studies that form the basis for the literature on older adults and video games in the social sciences. It corroborates the major results of this literature, including the variety of older players' motivations and preferences, the techno-enthusiasm that underlies the figure of the "silver gamer" and the importance of listening to older players themselves (De Schutter & Vanden Abeele 2015; Iversen 2014). The present study complements the existing research with a focus on collective, institutional play and older players' reflexive and ambivalent embodiment of the "silver gamer." In that sense, the present study not only contributes to the discussion about older adults' creative and skilful uses of technology but also about their agentivity within the constraints of contemporary old age. Grounded in ethnographic methods and in a distinctive space, this research does not aim to provide a general overview or classification of older players' preferences and motivations. Instead, it engages with the situated experience and perspective of these 15 women,

who in turn provide an insight into the challenges faced by older adults who play video games.

### Literature Review: Ageing in and through Technology

In a social constructivist perspective, old age is a social and cultural phenomenon that is shaped by representations, implemented in institutions and material conditions (from state pensions to care homes) and actualised through interactions with others. Old age is an experience structured by the effort to reconcile a sense of continuity and coherence of one's identity with the reconfigurations permitted or imposed by old age (Caradec 2003). Insofar as ageing individuals share this experience, the category of "older adults" proves relevant for analytical purposes although it remains critical to acknowledge the heterogeneity within this category.

Ageing brings complex and sometimes contradictory representations to coexist. The contemporary experience of old age is marked by the predominance of the biological and medical prism that frames the ageing body as declining and frail (Katz 1996). In a capitalist, work society, the ageing individual becomes problematised as non-productive and burdensome (Kohli 1988). In response, the discourse of successful ageing urges individuals to take personal responsibility for their health through consumerism and self-reliance, in line with neoliberal governmentality (Rudman 2006, 2015). Discourse entails a normative and disciplinary dimension (Marhánková 2011).

Technology features prominently in the experience of ageing. It may smooth out age-related changes or it may highlight them, sometimes to the point of threatening one's sense of self (Gucher 2012). This proves particularly salient for gerontechnology, that is, technology explicitly designed for older adults, which draws on the techno-optimistic belief that ageing is a problem that innovative technology can solve (Peine et al. 2021). Even when its implementation fails, it shapes old age by enforcing specific expectations and norms (Domínguez-Rué & Nierling 2016; Marshall & Katz 2016).

As "grey cyborgs," older adults have a complex and intimate relationship with technology (Dalibert 2015; Joyce & Mamo 2006). Joyce and Loe coin the term "technogenarian" to emphasise older adults' agentivity and

creativity with technology despite its constraints (2011: 1). Older adults actively use, adjust and reject technology in order to age comfortably. This practice stands in sharp contrast with injunctions of performance and productivity (Loe 2011). Persistent representations of tech-hostile elders tend to erase their nuanced decision-making regarding technology use and equipment, which takes into account the perceived usefulness and meanings of a technology in relation to already-available and already-mastered technology (Caradec 2001). This highlights the crucial role of the life course and past experiences with technology, that is, technobiographies, in older adults' relationship with technology (Buse 2010). Technology is imbued with social and affective meanings that shape its uses (Sawchuk & Crow 2012). The experience of technology in old age is structured by the material conditions and other embodied identities of the ageing individual.

The scientific literature on ageing and video games has been growing exponentially since the early 2000s with two dominant perspectives: the medical approach, which examines why older adults should play, and the game design approach, which examines how to get older adults to play (Iversen 2014). Both frame video games as a strategy of self-management for older adults with a strong emphasis on health. De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's "Gerontoludic Manifesto" calls for a shift in the literature and a renewed emphasis on the playfulness rather than the potential usefulness of games (2015). Social sciences research on video games and older adults provides stimulating insights into the matter. The genres most often mentioned are puzzle and match-3 games, as well as games that recreate classical games (such as chess or sudoku), which is consistent with the fact that those genres are the most played overall (Nap et al. 2009). Older adults participate in a variety of genre and play styles from MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role playing games, where players gather in vast online worlds to act out adventures, often including fighting monsters, solving quests and gathering resources) to plane flight simulators (De Schutter 2011). Older adults seem to play mostly on their own, in their homes and often at fixed hours for a fixed amount of time (Quandt et al. 2009). Overall, the 2008 Ludespace study estimates that one-third of people over 60 years had played video games at least once in 2012 in France (Berry et al. 2013).

## Methods: Making Older Adults' Play Visible

In the study of older adults' video game play, the challenge lies in making their practice visible. Not only are video game players relatively rare among older adults, but those who do play tend to minimise and underestimate their practice. They remain very discrete, if present at all, in online and offline spaces and communities dedicated to video games. Consequently, the very few spaces explicitly dedicated to older adults and video games constitute precious opportunities to study their play and listen to their perspective.

The present article draws on the ethnography of a video game workshop for adults over 60 years old. The workshop takes place in a cultural centre dedicated to digital arts and culture in a large city in France. It was initiated in 2011 by the coordinator of the gaming space, a large room with consoles and tablets freely accessible to visitors. Each of the 2-hour, weekly sessions brings together a half-dozen participants and two organisers. Sessions start with a presentation of the week's theme (e.g. platform games or women in games) and games by the organisers. Participants then wander among the eight available consoles and play between one and four games per session. In 2014–2015, there were 15 regular participants, all women between 60 and 82 years with an average age of 69 years old. Most participants started attending the workshop either because they regularly visited the cultural centre and noticed the workshop or because they were looking for stimulating leisure activities to fill their free time. Within this group of relatively young older adults, most have no visible health issue or disability. All of them have or had a career and a higher education degree; a participant describes the group as "middle class." However, the group is not homogeneous in terms of economic capital: some cannot afford to buy a second-hand computer while others take international vacations several times a year.

The fieldwork was conducted over 7 months, from September 2014 to March 2015, and consisted of the observation of 13 two-hour workshops involving 15 participants and 2 organisers and 17 interviews, including 9 with workshop participants and 8 with individuals who are involved in initiatives to encourage older adults to play video games or who make games for older adults. When doing preliminary research on video games and older adults, the researcher had identified the workshop

and contacted the organisers, who allowed the researcher to attend the workshop as long as participants agreed. Because of the troubled history of scientific research on old age, which has contributed to disciplining and de-humanising older adults (Katz 1996), the research project placed a particularly strong emphasis on participants' consent and approval. Many participants actively engaged with the research with the explicit goal of "setting the record straight" and combatting reductive stereotypes on "gaming grandmas."

Observation was non-participant, but overt, in order to ensure that participants had control over their involvement in the project. The researcher introduced herself and her project to the participants at the beginning of the year and before each individual interview. While the researcher could sit with participants to watch them play (asking for permission each time), she did not interfere or participate in their play. Although she was familiar with most of the game genres and mechanics featured in the workshop, the researcher usually discovered games alongside participants during the workshops. Nine participants agreed to an interview, which consisted of a semi-directive, one-hour-and-a-half interview that included questions about participants' life story, play practices and video game biography. Interviews took place either in the cultural centre (but outside of the time and place of the workshop) or in nearby cafés.

### "It Was More Like an Enemy": Recovering from the Moral Panic on Video Games

A primary site of discursive tension lies in the debates about the effects of video games: are they dangerous or enriching (Carbone & Ruffino 2012)? The women who attend the workshop are thrown into the normative struggle that opposes proponents and detractors of video games. Participants themselves are receptive to both the moral panic over a violent and addictive practice and to the rehabilitative discourses that stress the cultural value of games. They resolve those contradictions by enforcing a distinction between good and appropriate and bad and dangerous games or play styles.

The moral panic of the 1990s left a lasting mark on the representation of video games. Its arguments regularly come up in participants' comments and interviews as most participants discovered the existence of video

games in the 1990s context of anxiety and reprobation. French mainstream media started covering video games at that time, and the themes of violence, pathology and addiction emerged over the next decade (Bogost & Mauco 2008). Right-wing politicians, then in the parliamentary minority, made video games a political argument in the debate over safety and civil order. Moral entrepreneurs such as a police union and a Christian association further fuelled the debate. Several denunciations of video games overlap in this media panic: video games as a trigger for mental illness, as moral deviance and as a devalued practice of lowbrow culture. As a result, most participants come into the workshop with suspicion towards video games:

*[Before coming here, what did you know about video games?] I knew about addiction. ... I'd seen some unbelievable stories about it on TV. The guy who stops eating, it's because he's spending all his time on it. ... You see a teenage girl, her mother tries to get into her room, the girl barricades her room, insults her mother, "Bitch, leave me alone, I'm on my video game." There, that's what video games do to people. The mother says, "But listen, you have to go to class, it's 2 p.m., you've been lying in bed since this morning, you haven't done your homework. Forget the video game, you haven't even been outside." And the girl keeps playing, and then a psychotherapist comes in and tries to solve the conflict. I thought, "But how can you become like that, a total addict?" (Anne, 62)<sup>1</sup>*

However, over time, various stakeholders have worked towards mitigating the effects of moral panics. The video game industry, supported by the video game trade press, has made enthusiastic claims about the psychological and social benefits of video games (Carbone & Ruffino 2012). Meanwhile, professionals in the field of cultural production argued for the cultural and artistic value of video games. In their wake, politicians and policymakers have defended the video game industry as a bastion of French creativity and technological innovation (Dauncey 2012). In this context, the participants often revise their initial judgements: "Because I was biased, I thought that the only video games out there had violence, war... And video games with unrealistic bimbos" (Catherine, 63). The figure of the newcomer, the person who attends the workshop for the first time, is central to participants' re-evaluation of video games: "there are always newcomers who come here because they have heard that [video

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<sup>1</sup> To protect participants' anonymity pseudonyms have been used in this study.

games are] dangerous, because they're afraid of video games, because they want to know if ... people get addicted to it" (Mireille, 60). Participants are not merely at the receiving end of an effort to legitimise video games: they also take part in this effort.

The workshop challenges participants' early opinions of video games but without fully offsetting them. Despite organisers' insistence that video games do not make players violent, participants continue to be wary: "And now, it's true that with the [2015 Paris terrorist attacks], we've shown that video games can incite [violence], that the scenario of the attacks was inspired by a video game" (Nicole, 62). Participants' technobiographies contribute to their ambivalence towards video games, as their early encounters with video games have shaped their outlook on the practice. Even though two-thirds of them did not play video games before coming to the workshop, and half of them still do not play outside of the workshop, all have had experiences with video games before. Many participants first heard about video games in their professional life, for example, as teachers using educational games or employees in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) field witnessing the advent of the video game industry. When participants recount these experiences, it is in terms of curiosity and even enthusiasm. However, many also came across video games in their role as caregivers for children and teenagers, when their children, nephews and nieces or pupils started playing or asking for consoles and games. In that context, the beginning of their relationship with video games was marred by conflict and anxiety: "I fought a lot with [my children] because they were always playing video games and I didn't understand what they were doing. At the time, I was angry because they played instead of doing school stuff, tidying up; at the time it was more like an enemy" (Isabelle, 60).

In order to accommodate their ambivalence, participants create a distinction between good and bad games, as well as good and bad ways to play video games. Overall, it is the absence of violence that makes a video game acceptable. A participant explains that the workshop reconciled her with video games because it introduced her to non-violent games: "I discovered a whole new world here, a variety of video games that I had no idea existed, a lot of beauty, a lot of fun, a lot of poetry, humour... In short, an absence of violence. There isn't any violence at all in many, many, many games" (Catherine, 63). The category of "violent" games is

remarkably broad: it not only includes depiction of violence or war but also any mechanism that forces players to fight against another (player or non-player) character. However, as participants become more familiar with different genres and titles, they amend the classification, adding nuance and including redemptive criteria such as artistic value or humour:

And [...] in the end, we are sometimes charmed by games that... For instance, I remember the game *Street Fighter*. I used to see my children play *Street Fighter*, I thought it was horrible, because the graphics are made so that the characters look absolutely disgusting, repulsive. And in fact, when you play it, you can clearly see that it's a second degree kind of humour and that, on the contrary, it's fun. You have fun choosing the characters that seem the most horrible to you, and you take a lot of pleasure in it, it's very funny. (Danielle, 64)

The tolerance for violent play extends to their children and grandchildren, to the point that a participant considers that games have to be at least a little violent to be interesting:

And I've looked for, because I asked [organisers], games that are still a bit violent, because a kid at 16 wants something violent. So I asked them about fighting games and all that, but they weren't hyper violent, hyper dangerous things. And that way I could make him play a lot of things and buy a lot of things that weren't silly, eh? (Mireille, 60)

Participants also devise a specific play style to distance themselves from violence and addiction. They insist on setting spatial and temporal limits to their play in order to protect themselves from the dangers they associate with video games. Among participants who play outside of the workshop, most have decided not to buy a console (which would allow them to play the workshop's games) because they would spend too much time on it. Their play outside of the workshop is predominantly a fragmented, interstitial style of play. Participants also value collective play and usually play single-player games together, passing the controller back and forth, even when there are enough consoles for each of them to play on their own. This collective practice is intentional, claimed and even theorised:

But hey, I feel that I am not only an observer, I am an active observer. That is to say, I experience the video game through, even if I'm not the one holding the controller, through the actions of other people. I think that ... we go much further together than we would be able to on our own. (Danielle, 64)

Altogether, discourses are constraining, but they are also malleable. Older players make sense of the existence of opposing perspectives on video games (as either dangerous or valuable) by differentiating good and bad ways of playing video games. This distinction allows them to participate in both discourses at once while distancing their own practice from decried representations of play and contributing to the rehabilitation of (certain) video games.

### **“But She’s A Bit Crazy”: The Precarious Intersection of Age, Gender, and Video Games**

For the women who attend the workshop, it is unexpectedly complicated to inhabit the identity of “someone who plays video games.” The entrenched figure of the “gamer” essentialises video games as something that is “for boys” and participants are acutely aware that they depart from expectations. In order to manage the feeling of not-belonging, they draw on the very elements that set them apart, that is, their age and gender.

The relationship of participants with video games is shaped by the intersection of ageing and gender. Old age transforms the experience of gender. Older men face the devaluation of their masculinity, closely related to the notion of a powerful and youthful body, although certain categories of men benefit from the association of old age with power and authority (Calasanti 2004). The experience of old age is one of exclusion and invisibility for women as their aging body limits their ability to comply with the norms and expectations of femininity (Gilleard & Higgs 2014). Masculinity affects men’s relationship to their body, which has direct consequences on their healthy life expectancy, while gender inequalities heavily weigh on women’s ageing, especially in terms of their economic situation.

Several representations converge to reinforce the idea that older women are both uninterested and unskilled in video games. Technology and ICT in particular continue to be constructed with masculine qualities by their designers, their promoters and their users (Jouët 2003), while dominant representations frame older adults as reluctant to change and unable to comprehend new technology (Caradec 2001). The representation of video games as “a boy thing” is prevalent (Thornham 2008). This representation

is fuelled by the video game industry's focus on teenagers and men as its core demographic. The hostility of many gaming spaces and communities towards women (Consalvo 2012) contributes to a gendered cultural barrier to participation in video games (Vossen 2018), and the identity of "gamer" is unequally accessible to players who do not fit the image of the male, white, heterosexual and cisgender gamer (Fron et al. 2007; Shaw 2013). Participants also occupy an uneasy position insofar as they are adults who indulge in play, which is an activity culturally reserved for children. The association of play with silliness and a lack of productivity proves problematic for adults in general (Deterding 2018; Thornham 2011) and particularly for older adults, who are always at risk of being denied personhood if they show signs that could be interpreted as senility (Gilleard & Higgs 2011). Video games are themselves particularly associated with youth, whether through the figure of the "gamer" or because of their status as new media.

Participants frequently refer to their supposed lack of skills with digital technology in general, in contrast to the assumed natural competence of children, as does a participant talking about her great niece:

Oh, this is depressing. With the Iphone, she was very, very fast. She's doing very well. Very quickly I had downloaded games for her, Frozen, videos, songs, nursery rhymes. At some point, I can't remember how old she was then, I would tell her "Wait, I'll find it for you", and she would say "No, let me do it" and in two seconds she would do it. That's the difference. (Nicole, 62)

Because of the position of invisibility and marginality that participants occupy as older women who play video games, participants are uneasy when it comes to acknowledging their practice. They sometimes downplay it to the point of denying that they play video games. During interviews, several participants initially stated that they did not play at all, only to mention a variety of games and play practices over time. Participants also express discomfort at the idea of occupying a space in which they feel they do not belong:

Yes, but I would never have gone to the gaming room. Because I used to come [to the centre] in the afternoon, and I always saw the children playing. And for me, it was groups of children who came to play. A video game workshop, I wouldn't even have thought of going there. (Catherine, 63)

As documented by the literature on older adults and video games, participants sometimes incur the judgement of their (adult) relatives and friends and adapt the visibility of their play accordingly (De Schutter & Vanden Abeele 2008; De Schutter et al. 2014; Quandt et al. 2009).

It's "But she's a bit crazy, at her age she started playing video games." Well, I also do sewing classes on Monday afternoons. Yesterday afternoon, I went there, it was very funny, we were talking about whatever and then one of the participants said: "Ah well, we had planned to hold the workshop on Tuesday morning". I say "I can't go, I have my video game workshop". They were like [*mimes astonishment*]. It felt like I'd said something inappropriate, almost rude, because they looked at me with such stupefaction! (Mireille, 60)

A participant even wonders: "Some may not even talk [about the workshop] to their husband. ... I actually want to ask them. Do you tell people what you do on Tuesday mornings?" (Anne, 62)

The women who attend the workshop also use their identity as a discursive resource to valorise their play. It is there that the intersection of age and gender fully comes into play. Being a woman compounds and intensifies the marginalising effects of being an older player but participants' position as older women has specific and even facilitating implications for their play. To begin with, participants draw on the assumption that the combination of their age and gender makes them immune to the temptation of violent and addictive forms of play:

[Fieldwork notes] Three participants play the adventure game "Mirror's Edge". They play the tutorial and learn how to move around the city. But as soon as the tutorial teaches them how to fight, one of them leaves. And when they have to learn how to use a gun, the other two get up and leave. They say that the game isn't interesting, that it's a game for boys. One says that the game tries to trick people into believing that it's not a boy's game, because the protagonist is a woman, but it doesn't fool them.

In the same vein, participants distance themselves from the play style they associate with men. The men who used to attend the workshop constitute counter-models:

They were nice, for sure, but they were coming in at 10 AM on the dot, they were leaving at 12 PM sharp, so there was no friendly chitchat, although

we tried. And then they were much more interested in the technical aspect. And also, when you took the controller and played better than them, you could see that it annoyed them, even if they didn't show it, you could see it very well. (Isabelle, 60)

Turning essentialist representations of age around, participants use their age and gender as signifiers of wisdom and moderation that guarantee their ability to play “dangerous” games in a safe manner. The women who attend the workshop also cite their age as the reason why they deserve to play, in line with Barrett and Naiman-Sessions’ findings on members of the Red Hat Society who reclaim a right to play in old age (2016). As a participant sums it up, “One of the women, that’s good to know, once said, ‘But I play because in my life I’ve never played, I’ve only ever worked’” (Mireille, 60).

It is no coincidence that this video game workshop for older adults is exclusively attended by women. This phenomenon finds its roots in the affinity of the successful ageing discourse with the performance of femininity, as well as in the gendered experience of leisure and technology over the life course. Marhánková highlights how gender shapes lifestyles in old age, with a higher involvement of women in leisure activities, collective endeavours and learning situations (2014). Delias notes that, among middle class “baby boomers,” women actually draw on their former low-paying secretarial or teaching careers to domesticate computers, while men in executive or managerial positions have usually not been in direct contact with computers during their work life and find themselves disadvantaged in retirement (2019). The technobiography of the workshop’s participants echoes these findings and illustrates that gender mediates the relationship of older adults with technology in complex ways.

To summarise, participants struggle with the fraught category of “gamer,” which is neither accessible nor desirable for older women. Many players, including some older players, manage this issue by minimising the visibility of their play, thus avoiding any categorisation. For their part, participants attempt to design a new category in which they value their age (and gender) as a positive influence on play rather than a stigma among players.

### “We Don’t Need a Pretext”: Extricating Oneself from Successful Ageing

Besides the discourses and representations relative to video games (and their effects, players and norms), the workshop is also a space where discourses about ageing abound. The most prevalent one, the discourse of successful ageing, constitutes a resource for participants to legitimise their play as part of a strategy to age healthily and productively. However, despite their overall compliance with the demands of successful ageing, the women who attend the workshop stay away from the figure of the “silver gamer.” While they borrow some of its arguments, such as “playing video games is a way to remain open-minded and up-to-date in old age,” they reject the most emblematic arguments of the “silver gamer” media discourse, which focus on health and grandparenthood.

The successful ageing discourse easily finds its way into a workshop dedicated to video games for older adults. Successful ageing and redemptive discourses about video games share the premise of technological solutionism: (digital) technology provides a solution to individual and social challenges by providing people with tools to improve themselves. In order to counter anxieties about the negative effects of video games, proponents of video games rehabilitation have argued that video games have *positive* effects on health, social integration and cognitive performance (Carbone & Ruffino 2012). As a result, video games fit well within the discourse of successful ageing, in particular in its emphasis on self-maintenance and self-improvement through technology (Iversen 2014). This discourse finds its way into the workshop mostly through the journalists who regularly attend the workshop. Journalists for TV programmes, magazines, newspapers, from both mainstream media and senior-oriented media, carry specific representations of older players into the workshop. As most participants do not talk about the workshop with their relatives and friends, it is mostly through journalists that they receive feedback about how their play is perceived. In that sense, journalists play a decisive part in participants’ negotiations with the discourse of successful ageing.

Firmly set in the “third age,” participants have affinities with successful ageing, which gives them hope about postponing the fourth age and its losses (Gilleard & Higgs 2014). Most of the women who attend the workshop are in their sixties, with a (former) professional career, a

middle-class income, a higher education degree and live without a disability. Many attend multiple cultural, artistic or sporting activities, in an associative, institutional or informal setting. This includes for instance sewing workshops, sculpture workshop and multimedia training workshops. These activities are combined with family obligations that take up their time: the care of children, grandchildren or grandnephews and nieces, as well as sick or dependent parents and in-laws. Two participants still work full- or part-time and many of the retired participants volunteer in non-profit organisations or associations. A participant concludes: "I can't imagine a retired person being out of the loop, retired people are hyperactive" (Michèle, 62).

Participants feel the weight of an injunction to stay active in retirement. They explicitly identify, and sometimes resent, the "social pressure" to remain a useful member of society in old age: "So they tell you, 'you have to be active', OK, but how?" (Michèle, 62). The workshop provides participants with an opportunity to be active in old age while still enjoying themselves and keeping a modicum of control over their time: "When you're retired you simply *have* to be a volunteer, I'm telling you [she laughs], and I thought, 'I still want to have fun'. So I was looking for an activity that was at least a little enjoyable, a little relaxing" (Nicole, 62). Such choices are part of a process of selective optimisation and compensation to accompany age-related changes in abilities and interests (Caradec 2018). As a participant explains, "[The workshop] has become an extra activity. When you get older you have less activities. I used to go to the gym every morning, then I had to stop because I was in too much pain. So often one activity replaces another" (Danielle, 64).

Participants have an ambivalent relationship with the successful ageing discourse. They borrow and adapt some of its arguments while keeping their distance with its core premise, namely that ageing is problematic. This matches the findings of the literature on older adults' perspective on successful ageing. Older adults often attempt to achieve (some of) the expectations of the successful ageing discourse (Marhánková 2011). However, they often refer to other value systems that prioritise comfort (Loe 2011), freedom (Van Dyk et al. 2013) or fate (Jolanki 2008) in old age. It holds particularly true for the many older adults for whom successful ageing is simply out of reach because of their health or age (Balard 2013).

Participants reject the predicament that they play for their health. They do believe that video games have positive effects on players' health but insist that it is not what motivates them to play. They dismiss a perspective that defines them as first and foremost an old person, frail and declining and erases their individuality:

I don't remember what media it was for, an article that was a bit about video games and health, and it tried to argue that video games were good for preventing ageing. And that annoyed me a bit, really, because it meant that we were really reduced to our age group. ... And I had the impression that we were all lumped together and that we were something like "the grannies who had come here to fight their Alzheimer's." That irritated me to no end. It was really from a medical point of view. When you see us playing, it's not like that at all! Of course, it can be a motivation, it's true that [playing video games] unlocks abilities, that's for sure. But is it really about preventing illness or degeneration? (Anne, 62)

Participants sometimes mention the supposed beneficial effects of video games to legitimise their practice. But they do so with no reference to their age or to illnesses associated with ageing: "it develops your imagination, your reflexes, ... It is an intellectual exercise that you have to perform" (Isabelle, 60).

The women who attend the workshop also firmly reject the "grandma narrative" that journalists sometimes use to frame their reporting. A participant sums up their discomfort:

We'd like people to say we're going to the video game workshop because we want to go there, we want to discover things. And we don't go because of some other reason. Because when they say "They go because they have grandchildren and they would like to know if it's dangerous or not for the grandchildren," well no, it's not true. ... We don't need a pretext. ... Just because we are older, we don't have the right to be interested in anything else [than our age]? And that's always annoying. They always write stuff like "Grannies hanging on to their joysticks", but no, we just play ... There's always something a bit housewifey, a bit condescending, "the little grannies," and it's very unpleasant. (Mireille, 60)

Indeed, most participants are not grandmothers, and even those with grandchildren resent a discourse that assigns them to a narrow, family-centered identity. As a matter of fact, only one of them has ever played with young relatives.

Overall, players retain a degree of control over their experience despite the weight of expectations and injunctions. And even when participants are well positioned to embrace the category of “silver gamer,” they resent its focus on old age, health and grandparenthood. This selective adherence to the figure of the “silver gamer” illustrates that discourses, while constraining the material conditions and interactions around play, remain malleable. Participants’ play is a discursive practice that shapes understandings of ageing and video games.

### Conclusion: Carving Out a Space for Play in Old Age

Older adults who play video games have to carve a space where their play is meaningful in a context saturated with contradictory and constraining discourses about video games and ageing. The moral panic of the 1990s still lingers and fuels concerns about addiction and violence in video games. The representation of the “gamer” perpetuates the notion that video games are the domain of “boys.” Both elements foster a sense of unease and circumspection among the women who attend the workshop. As a matter of fact, they often feel that they do not belong among video game players. Meanwhile, rehabilitative discourses that value video games and their positive effects on players defuse the remnants of the moral panic and provide participants with arguments to defend their play. The successful ageing perspective’s emphasis on self-work and health maintenance through technology provides another source of justification for older adults who play video games. However, the women who attend the workshop barely draw on either of these discourses despite their potential for the legitimation of their play. Indeed, while they seemingly emancipate older adults from representations of declining and tech-averse elders, they merely replace the traditional image of old age as decline with the spectre of the fourth age. Ageing remains a devalued and stigmatising identity that individuals do their best to discard. In the workshop (and in other areas of their life), participants resist and contest these understandings of old age through discursive practices and the construction of new categories and meanings.

Participants deploy a variety of (sometimes conflicting) strategies in order to keep certain identities at a distance: the addict hypnotised by mind-numbing games, the ageing woman who engages in a desperate

fight against neurocognitive decline, the grandma whose real motivation is to spend time with her grandchildren. Participants produce a reflexive commentary on their video game play, particularly when they are interviewed by journalists or in conversation with sceptical relatives. They have learned to deftly adapt their arguments in order to fulfil the expectations of whomever they face. This explains why interviews with participants are replete with contradictory statements and claims that are incompatible with observations made during the workshop, particularly regarding their motivations to play and their opinions about video games. During interviews, participants shifted their discourse from a very critical outlook on games to an affectionate account of the role of play in their lives when they figured out that the researcher also played video games. Games, then, are about making time for themselves, spending time with like-minded women, having fun even during hard times and pursuing lifelong interests.

In practice, this means that the older women who attend the workshop implement a distinctive way to play video games to accommodate their interest in video games in a complex discursive context. Participants enforce a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable games and between acceptable and unacceptable play based on representations inherited from moral panic and "gamer" culture. They value games that they perceive as non-violent and a play style that emphasises collaboration, a strict control of the time spent playing and a professed disinterest in competition or performance. This fosters a form of collective play that accommodates varying degrees of mastery over the technology and the gameplay. Of course, older adults are not the only category of video game players who prefer occasional play, collective play, or non-antagonistic play. But these play styles constitute an intentional and successful response to the set of constraints specific to older players, whose access to video games remains precarious.

Participants' experience highlights the complex intersection of age and gender in video game play and the weight of gendered understandings of ageing on their practices as players. Participants are doubly marginalised among video game players: as older adults and as women. However, the effects of gender mitigate the effects of age to an extent. Not only does the gendered life course provided participants with specific opportunities to discover video games and domesticate ICT but it also turned around

participants' expectations and representations about older women to their advantage. If older women are supposedly particularly weak and frail, then they must be wholesome gamers, unthreatened by addiction or violence. Older women can also find in video games a leisure compatible with the convergent expectations of femininity and successful ageing. A video game workshop is indeed something that denotes an active and dynamic old age, that is, supposedly productive (in terms of health maintenance), with a social component, but also childcare compatible and able to fit in the domestic space. Finally, the use of playfulness as resistance (here, to age-related expectations) is itself a gendered strategy, especially when it takes place within the masculine-coded context of digital technology. Their singularity, as older women who are visible in a space dedicated to video games, becomes a source of pride:

No, we don't play *Assassin's Creed* the same way that others do, it's true, but we do play. When we play *Prince of Persia* or *Assassin's Creed*, we go for a walk. We go on the rooftops, in the houses, we look at the landscapes, the costumes, the characters. Of course, our goal is not to kill everyone. But why can't we play like that too? Honestly? ... We can do like [a participant], two hours in front of *Journey*, walking her character around very calmly, with a lot of zen, beauty, aesthetics, and be fascinated by the game's art for two hours, just like in a painting exhibition. ... When it comes to video games, we have to fit into boxes. Well no, we don't fit into boxes. (Mireille, 60)

### Ethical Statement

Ethics approval was not required for this study, as it was conducted in France, which has no legal requirements or existing procedures for the ethical evaluation of research with human subjects (with the exception of clinical trials). The study was conducted in keeping with the ethical standards of the university and with the (verbal) consent of the participants and organisers. The author declares that they have no conflict of interest as the research received no funding.

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