

Age concern: an overlooked audience

Summary

Mature gamers are an often-overlooked, and large, market. We performed some sample in-depth research to get a taste for their needs, to see how games could fit into their lives, and to observe for opportunities for developers.

Background

Population demographics are changing. The proportion of people over 65 is increasing at an enormous rate. Dizzilyingly, in the USA alone for the next 19 years, approximately 10,000 people will turn 65 – every day – as the baby boomer generation matures¹.

Furthermore, people over 65 also live healthier lifestyles than ever before. They have greater mobility, and more disposable income than they ever have, on average. Through the internet they also have easy access to information to help them decide on what to spend their income. This essentially means that they have much greater freedom to do what they want, when they want. They make up an enormous market of informed, untapped game consumers.

Games consoles are becoming more inclusive. The Wii has famously given rise to mature gamers playing each other at Wii bowling in old people's homes. My parents (both in their 60's) now play Wii tennis at Christmas, while others break out the SingStar with the drinks as the family gets together. Kinect has made the need for fine motor skills, which deteriorate with age, such as button presses, even less important.

All of these factors indicate that there's a massive opportunity for games manufacturers to produce something that truly appeals to this mature, informed, audience; something that they can easily play without the need for multiple complicated button presses. The audience is there. The technology is there. Let's do it!

But from our experience at working with game producers, we know that the user requirements of this audience are often not understood. Instead publishers tend to focus on familiarity - the core gamer, 16 – 35 year old audience.

At PlayableGames we wanted to understand what mature gamers actually want and need. We wanted to observe their behaviour and lifestyles and observe unmet game needs that game producers could address with new concepts and IP. We performed a series of visits, each one for at least half a day, with existing Wii owners, so that we could understand their lives in depth. This type of ethnographic research is akin to immersing oneself in a far-flung tribe. The observer should shadow and observe daily routines without affecting their behaviour. By shadowing and observing users in their everyday lives, our researchers can discover unspoken desires and needs, as well as those they express verbally.

Findings

This is just a sample of some of the key findings from the research. The interpretation of the findings into potential game features is broad. When working with a client brief, our recommendations are often more specific.

- Mature gamers are not one homogenous group and shouldn't be thought of as such. They break down into various subcategories of user type. We don't assume all 16 – 34 year olds are the same, so there's no reason to assume that all 'old people' are too.
 - *Recommendation: Game concept requirements should be researched and marketed at particular categories of mature gamer, to understand their precise needs and interests, and what they consider to be 'fun', not just anyone over 65.*
- Often the audience is relatively new to gaming, suffering from low game playing confidence. They also tend to perceive it as being for younger people. Any setbacks in games hit them hard.

"I originally thought, it's not for me really – it's a computer thing... young technology and for a younger generation"

- *Recommendation: ensure the ramp up of difficulty is forgiving enough to start with, and include plenty of positive feedback and rewards early on. Help build their gaming confidence.*
- At the moment, mature gaming tends to be more casual than hardcore. Games are often picked up and played spontaneously, rather than people setting aside time for them. The image of people playing Wii in a care home prevails, but there are many other more casual mature gamers than that who might play for a quick 5 mins while on the bus (see first bullet point above re. subcategories of gamers).
- Game sessions tend to be brief, especially for sporting games. The stereotype is that this is because mature gamers are weaker and less fit. In some instances this was the case, but it was also the case for mobile games and PC games. They just needed a quick fix, and then would move on, or let someone else have a go.
 - *Recommendation: Games work well if each game turn or session is relatively short, with immediate feedback on success of failure or simple comparison of scores with other players. Make the game fit these requirements for short bursts of play.*
- The people we spoke to were careful with their money, and described their friends as similar.

They would take enjoyment from playing one favourite game for long periods of time, replaying and replaying it. But please don't think of the phrase 'elderly grinding', as it's not only unnerving, but isn't the main reason why they're replaying – from what we saw it was because they wanted to make the most of their financial outlay on the game.

- *Recommendation: Games for this audience need to stand up to multiple playthroughs. This means offering new features at each turn, and surprise random elements to attract repeat play.*
- Gamers had minimal experience of online play, but they were definitely interested in it, especially if they could play against friends or family. All of them were experienced internet users, and all of them had anecdotes of competing against their friends in other domains.

For example, one person was a member of the bowls team, and another loved playing badminton with her friends.

They were daunted by the technicalities and terminology of setting up online play – the routers, the cables, and the menus to navigate through.

However, they were not interested in playing against strangers:

“Because you wouldn’t know who you were playing against. They might be a pervy”

- *Recommendation: The demand for online is there, the setup needs to be simple, and as automatic as possible, and the focus should be on connecting them to their friends and family, especially those who live far away from them.*
- *Recommendation: Consider building in simple chat mechanisms for gamers to speak to friends and family as they play.*
- Seasonal variations affected their game playing. Mature gamers seemed more likely to be at home in the darker winter months. When we asked why, it was due to concerns about safety in the dark, and the weather affecting their behaviour more than younger gamers.

“I’m more inclined to do this in the winter and not the summer... I’ve more time in the winter.”

- *Recommendation: Be aware that mature gamers may be more likely to be playing games at home in the winter months than in the summer months. Consider the type and style of game that might therefore be most suited to when and where they are playing.*
- *Recommendation: Consider marketing games to mature gamers, and pushing online play, more heavily in the winter months as this is a time of year they are more likely to be separated from them. Focus on connecting them to friends and family as the priority (not strangers). Flag up simplicity and safety.*
- Some of the older mature gamers, liked games that went at their own pace, so that they didn’t feel rushed.
 - *Recommendation: ‘Beat the clock’ reward systems didn’t appear to be a popular mechanism so might be best avoided for this audience.*
- None of the participants read the manuals. Instructions needed to be on screen as prompts and the game needed to be self-explanatory.
- Traditional controller and multiple small button presses were a turnoff. There were many positive mentions of how the point-and-click mechanisms of the Wii were simple and worked well for them. Even the Wii Sports bowling mechanism of releasing the ball with the trigger took some of them a while to learn.
 - *Recommendation: Aim to use tried and tested gestures or movements that reflect real life.*
 - *Recommendation: Where possible, use gross motor movements as key game mechanics; try not to rely on fine motor skills.*

- Analogous to the simplicity of control, was the need for clear, simple speech instructions and audio feedback in the game.
 - *Recommendation: Aim to keep speech with the game clear, with limited background noise, and ideally, for the English audience, a 'nice clear English accent'. Also keep the language non-jargony and plain.*
- We also discussed what types of games appealed. They often talked about activities they did in the past (e.g. netball) or things they can't do now in real life (e.g. horse riding, ballet). Escapism and nostalgia were important aspects, although current interests were also mentioned (e.g. darts).
 - *Recommendation: Game concept requirements should be researched and marketed at particular categories of mature gamer, to understand precise needs and interests of precise audiences. As mentioned above, not all OAPs are the same!*

These sample findings and areas of recommendations hopefully shed some initial light on what could often be guided by guesswork and stereotype. As mentioned before, these are high-level, broad findings from a broad sample, but they allow us to understand which groups are most receptive to game generally, and what their requirements are. We can then focus in on them to uncover more details.

We also learnt that gaming has great social value to the mature audience. Many of those we spoke to talked of using a console game as a social hub, and inviting friends around to chat and play together. They felt that ideally it would keep them mentally, and/or physically active, and wanted to be included in the games. The brain and body are willing; they just need the right game to hook them.

About PlayableGames

PlayableGames has been studying (and playing) games for years. PlayableGames consists of a team of highly experienced gamers and user experience researchers, a team that shapes gaming experiences for console manufacturers and publishers in the UK and globally.

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ⁱ <http://www2.starexponent.com/news/2011/may/04/politifact-cantor-says-10000-baby-boomers-turn-65-ar-1016742/>