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Exergaming in retirement centres and the integration of media and physical literacies

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a multi-method analysis of a recently emergent, though still understudied, trend: the use of exercise-themed video games (i.e., 'exergames') in retirement centres. The study in question specifically featured participant observation and interviews with residents and members of staff at retirement centres in Ontario, Canada. Data collection was aimed at understanding how games such as Wii Bowling are being put to use in retirement centre contexts and the implications of such activity. Findings on the one hand suggest that exergames are deemed valuable in the process of promoting both social engagement and physical activity. 'Virtual' bowling can bring people together in communal spaces while also 'getting them up' and active. On the other hand, however, exergaming presents challenges. For retirement centre residents, it engenders health risks while also demanding the deft synchronization of media and physical literacies. For activities coordinators and other members of staff responsible for residents' care, it means they too must stay abreast of the technology sector's latest innovations; they must develop media and physical literacies of their own. These findings are used as a platform for a broader discussion of aging, embodiment, and media in the paper's final section. Against the backdrop of existing conceptualizations of the third age, the use of exergames in retirement centres is deemed conducive not to independence and consumerism fully-fledged, but rather to the manifestation of 'quasi-consumerism' and 'quasi-independence' instead. Third age logic is thus both reinforced and subtly undermined.

Introduction

This paper reports on a multi-method study of older persons' uses of exercise-themed video games, or exergames, in retirement centres – a recently emergent, though to date understudied trend. In recent years, retirement centres in Canada, the United States, and beyond have taken to employing games such as Nintendo's Wii Bowling as a way of promoting social engagement and physical activity among residents. This is a noteworthy trend in that it departs from two historical presumptions: first, that video gaming is strictly a pastime for youth; and second, that later life is a time for disengagement from physical and social activity. Instead, exergaming in later life reflects the arrival of third age logic that promotes 'active aging' as an avenue towards desirable health outcomes and sustained social engagement. But whereas the

literature to date has considered how leisure activities – particularly exercise participation (e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Paulson, 2005; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Pike, 2012) – are now part of the third age agenda, less attention has been paid to the deployment of new, interactive, physical activity-themed technologies towards this same end.

The study reported here specifically involved data collection at four retirement centres in Ontario, Canada, all of which utilized the Nintendo Wii as part of their activity programming. As described below, the Wii is a device that facilitates a 'first person' style of play whereby the player's movements are replicated on screen. Thus, rather than older persons frequenting the bowling alley, with games like Wii Bowling, the alley effectively comes to them. Methods used in this research included interviews with retirement centre residents and staff and participant observation of exergaming 'in action'.

This collection of methods yielded insight into the perceived merits and challenges of exergaming for older persons and retirement centre staff alike. Herein, study findings are first outlined and then used as a platform for a broader discussion of aging, embodiment, and media. Consideration is given in particular in the paper's Discussion section to how the incorporation of exergames into retirement centre contexts serves to both reinforce and subtly undermine the third age notion of independence-via-consumerism.

Before outlining study findings in full, a review of key literature on aging, media, and physical activity and an overview of the study's methodological protocol are provided below.

Literature review

The wider context for this research is one marked by population aging on the one hand and the arrival of 'third age' logic on the other. The former trend of course means the seniors market is swelling in its ranks; the latter means that later life is increasingly perceived as a time for sustaining an autonomous and active lifestyle, as opposed to 'allowing' age-related decline. For Gilleard and Higgs (2009), the third age is best understood as a generationally defined 'cultural field' built on the values of choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure (also see Gilleard & Higgs, 2013; Laslett, 1989). These values are in turn linked to a corresponding set of 'desirable' lived practices – engagement with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and participation in physical activity among them (e.g., see Millington, 2012; Higgs, Leontowitsch, Stevenson, & Jones, 2009; Katz & Peters, 2008; Pike, 2012; Vincent, Tulle, & Bond, 2008). Indeed, when it comes to physical activity, the third age construct overlaps to a great extent with the notion of 'active aging'. As Pike (2011) observes: "The idea of 'active aging' encompasses a variety of ways that older persons might maintain active citizenship and contribute to society, but invariably promotes physical activity and exercise as having health and social benefits" (p. 210; cf., Chodzko-Zajko, Schwingel, & Park, 2009). The third age at the same time exists in contradistinction to the so-called fourth age, an imagined, abject state characterized by the purported dependencies and indignities of 'real' old age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013; also see Higgs & Gilleard, 2013; Jones & Higgs, 2010).

In this context, retirement centres – the loci of this research – are precariously situated. On the one hand, as Hostetler (2011) observes, retirement centres hold potential as 'sites of resistance' against prevailing aging discourses and, indeed, wider social trends. For Steven Miles (2010, 2012), neoliberal cities now come replete with 'spaces for consumption'. These are 'physical-emotional' environments – shopping malls, cinema complexes, and themed restaurants, for example – that appear determined by consumption "in the sense that they symbolize a world in which there is apparently no other possibility than to consume" (2012, p. 224). There is an individualizing force at work in such spaces, not in that other social actors are absent but in that social ties are relatively weak, and in that such spaces operate on the basis of self-interestedness. In Hostetler's (2011) view, retirement centres hold the capacity to instill a sense of community in times of encroaching individualism. They are, for example, among the few spaces with intergenerational reach.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to presume that seniors' centres can ward off the above-described trends without fail. They too must reckon with the arrival of third age/neoliberal discourses. And so Hostetler points to the arrival of marketing slogans such as "this isn't your grandmother's senior center" (Hostetler, 2011, p. 174), as well as the displacement of traditional (or stereotypical) activities like knitting and crocheting in favour of more 'exciting' ones as signs that the neoliberal imperative does not stop at the retirement centre door. The concern is that reimagining seniors' centres in this way reifies a negative view of the 'fourth age' in hopes of appealing to a younger, third age demographic.

A game for everyone

Exergaming brings together two above-noted practices that are central to the third age agenda: media consumption and physical activity. That exergames – and especially the Nintendo Wii – have been incorporated into retirement centre activity programming is perhaps unsurprising given their use in physical therapy (e.g., see Bateni, 2012) and physical education (e.g., see Klein & Simmers, 2009), among other health-related contexts. Moreover, when it comes to the Wii, Nintendo has explicitly courted older persons in selling this device.

In conceptual terms, where the Wii departs from its predecessor technologies is in its fusion of media and physical literacies. To be sure, the Wii console does not represent the video game industry's first attempt at merging exercise and gaming. As Bogost (2007) recounts, for example, in the 1980s Nintendo released the Power Pad – a device compatible with the Nintendo Entertainment System (a forerunner to the Wii) and one upon which gamers stood to control an on-screen avatar in games such as *World Class Track Meet*. Even so, video gaming ultimately earned a reputation as a sedentary pastime. The release of the Wii console in the mid-2000s was aimed in part at undoing this reputation (Millington, in press). The Wii's 'first person' style of play, in which the console's motion-tracking remote controller captures movement-in-the-flesh and replicates it on screen, combines media and physical literacies in a more obvious way than ever before.

Media literacy as a concept has received considerable attention in the literature to date. Livingstone (2003a) describes media literacy in a fundamental sense as comprising the ability "to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts" (p. 6; cf., Aufderheide, 1993, p. xx). The Wii evidently brings these various steps into play – for example, in that gamers must analyse initial 'menu' interfaces in Wii Bowling before progressing to those designed for actual gameplay. Yet Livingstone's (2003a) main contribution when it comes to media literacy is to add complexity to each of the elements listed above. 'Access' is especially noteworthy in this regard. Access extends, Livingstone argues, beyond the procuring of hardware or software: "it must be evaluated in terms of the ongoing nature and quality of access to media technologies, contents and services" (p. 7). Buckingham (2007) makes a similar point in noting that access involves cultural skills and competencies for using technology creatively and productively (p. 181).

For its part, 'physical literacy' is commonly seen in quantitative terms, with corporeal measurement imagined