

The Elusive Silver Gamer:

Representations and Practices of Older Video Game Players

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ABSTRACT

The Elusive Silver Gamer: Representations and Practices of Older Video Game Players

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Over the past two decades, the increasing academic, institutional and media interest in older adults who play video games has popularized the figure of the “silver gamer” and its project of successful aging through digital play. This doctoral research examines what is at stake in older adults’ video game play. It stands at the intersection of the studies of aging, game studies, and studies of technology. The research accounts for the reciprocal relationship between discourses and practices as well as the agency of players within a constraining environment. It draws on fieldwork conducted in 2019-2020 in France: on one hand, biographical semi-directive interviews with sixteen older adults who play video games on their own; and, on the other hand, the ethnography of an association that organizes video game workshops in aged care institution, with non-participant observation in thirty of these workshops.

The dissertation begins with an examination of the conflicted relationship between old age, play, and digital technology that limits older adults’ ability to become video game players. It then investigates the “silver gamer” discourse, outlining its techno-enthusiastic anti-aging narrative and its difficult implementation as a result of older players’ indifference towards its promises. The figure of the “silver gamer” establishes a narrow scope for older adults’ play, associated with health and self-discipline rather than fun or skill. The dissertation proposes an analysis of older adults’ gaming careers and play practices.

The distinctive patterns in older adults’ video game play reflect the uneasy cultural and social condition of old age in contemporary societies. Older players tend to be particularly self-conscious, isolated from other players, discreet, and stable in their choice of games. Their play articulates a complex moral economy around time, freedom, and productivity. Their video game play exhibits a sense of marginality and restriction, but also adaptability and resistance, that is grounded in the experience of old age. The present research argues that the cultural representations, social norms, and material conditions associated with this stage of the life course interacts with individuals’ experience of leisure, play, and technology. In sum, (old) age matters in (video game) play.

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Faites attention dans le pays de la neige.

Lisez tout sinon vous ne comprendrez rien.

À mon père.

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INTRODUCTION. THE ELUSIVE SILVER GAMER

“Mo-nique! Mo-nique! Mo-nique!”¹ In front of the stage, a typical video game convention audience of teenage boys and young men chant the name of their champion, seventy-year-old Monique. The *Wii Bowling* tournament is coming to an end and the next few minutes are decisive. Spectators are all in: they hold their breath while the virtual bowling ball runs its course on the screen, explode into cheers when the last pin falls, and jump up and down after a particularly impressive throw. When Monique, who has just scored two strikes in a row, lifts her sleeve to reveal a scorpion tattoo on her upper arm, all hell breaks loose in the bleachers. The commentators play it up: “This might be the craziest esports competition you’ll ever see!”

There is indeed no equivalent to the *Golden-Age Games*² yearly *Wii Bowling* competition for players over sixty-five years old. Its success has led the association to set up several regional finals in some major French video game conventions. The competition, held every year since 2015 to publicize the *Golden-Age Games* video games workshops for older adults, has become an eagerly awaited event and a symbol of the rise of the “silver gamer”. As such, the *Golden-Age Games* project constituted a fitting starting point for my research on older video game players. Since my first contact with the association in 2018, I have been attending general assemblies and *Wii Bowling* competitions, delving into their archives and media coverage, and spending time with various actors involved in the project. In 2019, I spent four months touring thirty *Golden-Age Games* workshops in nursing homes and community centres all over France. I met with 172 older adults who play *Wii Bowling* and other games in these workshops, as well as about eighty coordinators, volunteers, and other organizers involved in running the workshops. I then conducted interviews with sixteen older adults who also play video games on their own in the first half of 2020, just as the Covid-19 pandemic hit France.

Drawing on my encounters with older players and the people around them, I make the argument that older adults play video games in a distinctive way that reflects their social and cultural position. Old age is structured by normative shifts and conflicts about the proper way to age, disrupted social roles and identities, and social and economic marginalization. It is an unsettling experience that can be liberating as well as isolating. As they enter this stage of the life course, individuals navigate new constraints and challenges by establishing strategies and finding resources that let them inhabit a desirable and comfortable old age. The experience of aging thus generates a distinctive form of video game play that is particularly constrained but also singularly creative. Through video game play, older adults engage with problematic representations and discourses of aging. I contend that a discourse about digital play in old age

¹Pseudonyms are systematically used in field notes and interviews.

²I use a pseudonym instead of the project’s actual name.

is emerging, making digital play into an arena where social actors negotiate and reconfigure the contemporary meanings of aging.

The Rising Star Of The Silver Gamer

In 2010, the *Centre d'études stratégiques*, an offshoot of the French Prime Minister's office tasked with strategic data gathering and policy planning, published a report on population aging (Gimbert and Godot 2010). Like many policy documents, the "Living Together Longer" report describes population aging as a problem that needs to be addressed with technological solutions, in line with the technological determinism that pervades contemporary debates about old age (Domínguez-Rué and Nierling 2016). Among other strategies, the report mentions video games as an anti-aging instrument. "Technology against cognitive aging: merely entertainment, a remediation method, or a socializing activity?", it wonders, reviewing arguments for and against digital games. On one hand, the authors argue, games are accessible and can be adapted to a wide range of disabilities, they are more attractive than traditional therapies, and they cost much less than other, more human-intensive forms of care. On the other hand, authors admit, studies do not actually demonstrate that video games have positive effects on older adults' health.

Despite its cautious conclusions, the publication of the *Centre d'études stratégiques*'s report marks a shift in the development of a discourse on older adults as video game players. As the first French policy document that addresses video games in relation to successful aging, it institutionalizes the "silver gamer" narrative that surfaced in the French mainstream press throughout the 2000s (Lavenir and Bourgeois 2017). Titles such as "Alien-killer seniors!" or "Video games: Retirees say Wii!" cropped up in newspapers and magazines while a new discourse on older players challenged representations of older adults as grouchy and tech-averse, play as the prerogative of childhood, or gamers as rebellious teenagers. A dossier in the French magazine *Le Point* (Lamoureux 2015) reflects on this shift:

Who would have predicted, even ten years ago, that video games, a pastime for dumb teenagers that is still surrounded by many clichés, e.g., that they turn players into psychos at worst and violent offenders at best, would earn its badge of honour with the elderly?

This emerging discursive landscape transforms older adults' experience of video games. It acknowledges the existence of older adults who play video games and even celebrates their play as a responsible and productive endeavour. Yet its implementation proves difficult as its expectations are out of line with older adults' diverse experience of video games.

Situating Old Age, Defining Video Games

This emerging figure of the silver gamer is multifaceted and polysemic. Actors who are involved in older adults' play and older video game players themselves use "older gamers" (and variations like "silver gamers" or "senior gamers") to describe a diverse range of experiences and practices. Depending on the context, the phrase "older gamers" refers to nursing home residents who occasionally play console games under the supervision of employees and medical professionals, or seniors who casually play on their phones during commutes and in waiting rooms, or older adults who spend several hours a day playing First Person Shooters or Role-Playing Games online. Each of these groups is a compelling focal point in its own right for a study of older adults' play. The first group attracts the most media attention and is at the heart of a noticeable discursive shift on video games. The second group is the most representative of older players' practices, in a statistical sense. The third group has the most visible and perhaps most intense relationship with video games, at least in terms of time, identity, and material investment. Yet rather than focusing on one or the other, I include all of these practices in my investigation of older adults' play: in their disparity, they bring into view the many ways in which video games fit into the social and cultural experience of old age.

The definition of these "older gamers" owes its ambiguity to the fact that neither old age nor digital games are stable categories. The former is a culturally situated notion that describes the later stage of life, generally defined by the combination of a chronological threshold, a change in social and economic roles, and/or a change in physical abilities (Glascock and Feinman 1980). In contemporary Western societies such as France, where this research is conducted, individuals over sixty years old³ share a collective predicament that is shaped by devalued cultural images of old age, a pressure to age successfully, an assignment to certain identities through interactions with relatives, friends, and strangers, a dependence on the State as a purveyor of pensions and benefits, and so on (Caradec 2012). Old age is however not a monolithic experience. Aging intersects with other identities and positions such as gender, class, or race (Katz and Calasanti 2015), and individual life trajectory shapes the experience of old age. Furthermore, while the body and its changes play a role in the experience of aging, old age cannot be reduced to a deterministic biological process (Sandberg 2013). Physiological manifestations of aging strongly vary among individuals and have different implications depending on the circumstances and environment in which the aging person lives, a factor that Gucher calls the "milieu effect" (2012). Finally, the category lumps together several age groups and generations, even though sixty-something have more experiences and references in common with middle-aged adults than with the oldest of the old (Renaut 2011). In sum, older adults are a heterogeneous group whose members nonetheless share a distinctive position in society, and it is in this sense that I use the phrase "older adults" in my analysis.

³The age of sixty is not a strict chronological threshold, but a culturally and institutionally defined moment of transition towards old age. The age of sixty holds a specific definitional power in the French context (Ennuyer 2011). The threatened but still strong welfare state is one of the main actors in the definition of old age through institutions such as the retirement system, "*minimum vieillesse*" benefits (that complement low pensions to combat elderly poverty), public nursing homes, and local structures such as *CLICs* (Local Centres For Gerontological Information and Coordination). In order to benefit from most of these rights and services, individuals have (or had, in the case of retirement) to be at least sixty, a legal provision that has durably shaped the public perception of old age.

Old age constitutes a shared experience for people who are identified as old (through their chronological age, participation in certain activities, or bodily signs of aging) by others. It is a social category that individuals may occupy at different ages and in different contexts, sometimes willingly and sometimes not, as a result of (or in relation to) a combination of social, cultural, physiological, institutional, and material changes. As Balard (2013: n.p.) notes, older adults themselves

understand the changes that propel an individual into old age as eminently social. [...] In this perspective, one does not become old exclusively for physiological reasons; one becomes old also (and above all!) when the social group refers to us (even indirectly) as old by not treating us “like anyone else” anymore.

It is in this broad sociological definition of old age, informed by critical gerontology and the sociology of aging, that I situate this research. I follow the perspective proposed by Wanka and Gallistl (2018:6) in their material praxeology of aging and technology, in which they argue that “age is not a biological attribute, but rather a practical process that is being done”, particularly through technology.

Video games are also an elusive object. Three challenges complicate scholars’ attempts at stabilizing a definition for video games. Firstly, game studies scholars struggle with the definition of play, inheriting play studies’ banquet-like “wide variety of offerings”, to paraphrase Henricks (2008). One definition of play that has had a relatively successful trajectory in game studies, inspired by Henriot’s work (1969), defines play as an encounter between a structure that is amenable to play and an individual whose ludic attitude activates the structure’s potential. Secondly, definitions of video games have to address the specificity of digital games within the realm of play, particularly regarding the distinct materiality of digital media and the question of virtuality and simulation. Thirdly, game studies scholars come to question the boundaries of their object, and particularly what counts as a video game and what does not. They have to contend with gamer culture’s boundary-making efforts (that often work towards excluding games that are deemed too casual, girly, or childish) as well as the many experiences that stand at the edge of play (from pinball machines to the “Dino Runner” mini-game that appears when the Firefox browser fails to connect to the Internet).

In order to consider the complexity of video games as a technology, media, and leisure practice, I refrain from proposing a stable definition of video games. I draw instead on an interpretivist framework to document social actors’ understanding of my research object, and I use it to construct a broad definition that encompasses all the activities and objects described as “video games” by the people I have met, observed, and interviewed (Schaffer 2015). In summary, in the context of this research, older adults who play video games are individuals over sixty⁴ who

⁴While old age is not a category with strict and stable chronological boundaries, the age of sixty constitutes a useful methodological point of reference for the constitution of a sample. As the previous footnote suggests, state institutions (most of whom define old age through chronological age) play a structuring role in the identity

report that they occasionally (at least several times a year) play games on a computer, smartphone, console, or tablet. As such, the definition includes a wide variety of game genres (from match-3 puzzles like *Candy Crush* and indie games like *Limbo* to online *Scrabble* and adventure games like *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*) and play styles (from supervised workshops in nursing homes to hour-long online gaming sessions with friends).

Pigeonholing The Older Video Game Player

Older adults who express an interest in video games find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Older adults are not imaginable as video game players to many, including themselves. Firstly, older adults are relatively rare among video game players. In 2012, a third of adults over 60 years old had played video games at least once during the year and about 15% had played at least once a week; by way of comparison, over 90% of 18–24-year-olds had played at least once during the year and 40% during the week (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). Secondly, older video game players are marginal in the spaces and communities dedicated to video games. Playful activities are culturally associated with childhood, and their acceptability in adulthood depends on their practitioners' ability to devise alibis, for instance by emphasizing the instrumental potential of their play (Deterding 2018). Moreover, technological forms of play bring up the assumed incompatibility between new technology and older adults (Caradec 2001a). Older adults' interest in video games is received by others with attitudes that range from benevolent derision to strong disapproval (De Schutter, Vanden Abeele, and Brown 2014). Thirdly, older adults fall outside of the gamer identity, which holds particular significance in gaming cultures. It revolves around:

a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to “minority” players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. (Fron *et al.* 2007:1)

The silver gamer discourse and its promotion of digital play in old age has its own shortcomings. It provides older adults with a positive identity to inhabit as video game players and provides a solid alibi for their play. The figure of the silver gamer has however not revolutionized the image and experience of older adults who play video games. Instead, somewhat counter-intuitively, it has reinforced deprecatory representations of old age and imposed additional expectations and constraints onto older players' practices. It defines older adults' play exclusively in relation to their age and their presumed efforts to combat aging. In her study of the scientific literature on older adults and video games as a disciplinary discourse, Iversen (2016:12) demonstrates that “[a]geing adults are here portrayed 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”. As a result,

and experience of older adults. It is a choice commonly made by researchers who conduct fieldwork with older adults both in France and in other national contexts (e.g. Alvarez 2014; Van Dyk *et al.* 2013; Repetti 2015).

the focus is foremost on the potential beneficiality of playing while elements otherwise often associated with playing games such as pleasure, fun, relaxation, or finding ways of tackling existence are often wholly lacking or treated as a means to a greater and more important end. (p. 14)

These “greater ends” include cognitive and physical health maintenance as well as social inclusion, intergenerational connections, and digital literacy. De Schutter and Vanden Abeele’s “Gerontoludic Manifesto” (2015:113), which stands as a scientific program for the study of older adults as video game players, stresses that this perspective “instills a reductionist perspective on ageing as merely a process of decline and debilitation”. Older adults’ play is framed as a watered-down version of “real” gaming that emphasizes specific genres such as brain training software and practices such as exercise regimen-like regularity. The figure of the silver gamer establishes a narrow scope for older adults’ play, associated with health rather than fun or skill. In this context, video games become one more arena in which older adults have to contend with the norms of contemporary aging and the pressure to age actively, productively, and inconspicuously.

In sum, older adults who play video games do so in a cultural context that offers them two representations of older adults as video game players: the non-gamer or the silver gamer. Yet the experience of older adults who play video games exceeds the boundaries set by these representations. Older adults’ video game play proves to be considerably more diverse and complex than suggested by the non-gamer/silver gamer dichotomy. Older adults’ play is discreet to the point of invisibility, but its more visible practices (for instance in the *Golden-Age Games* finals or newspaper articles mentioned above) reflect neither a strong preoccupation with health nor a lack of gaming skills. Older adults’ play presents characteristics that reflect the ambivalent experience of contemporary old age.

A Distinctive Experience Of Video Games In Old Age

Old age matters in older adults’ experience of video games. Both quantitative and qualitative data point to a specific experience of video games in old age (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021; De Schutter and Malliet 2014; De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2008; Brown 2014). Brown’s research on digital gaming in old age highlights the role of video games in providing meaningfulness and continuity in old age, as well as the interaction between older adults’ biographies, experience of old age, and video game play. Recurring patterns emerge, both in the literature and in my own research: older adults’ play tends to be particularly self-aware, solitary, discreet, and stable in its practices.

Older adults who play video games are aware of their marginal place in gaming culture as well as the suspicions that surround their hobby. As a result, they tend to make their play as inconspicuous as possible, hiding it or reframing it as another, more acceptable activity (such

as “doing a puzzle” or “messaging around on the phone”). They are often solitary players with no access to play-centered social circles and communities. This shields their practice from criticism or interference while also opportunities to learn about and master new games, genres, and play devices. Consequently, older adults’ practices are remarkably stable, often focusing on one game for a long time and taking extended breaks between periods of play. Older adults who play video games also manifest a high degree of reflexivity regarding the place of video games in their life, particularly in terms of time management. Several preoccupations coexist: a worry about wasting time on “silly games”, a fear of becoming addicted to a hobby that ultimately steals their time, an effort to perform successful aging and the ethos of the dynamic senior, but also a refusal to dedicate their leisure to productive pursuit and health maintenance, and a strong commitment to enjoying time once it is finally freed from work and other obligations.

These patterns – self-awareness, discretion, stability, and a rigorous management of play in terms of temporality – can be traced back to the social and cultural experience of old age in contemporary Western societies. Some of these patterns are not exclusive to older players. For instance, the effort to hide one’s play is frequent among women who play video games, particularly when they engage in devalued “casual” play styles (Anable 2013). But the frequency and combination of these characteristics set older adults’ play apart. I therefore argue that old age matters in video game play because its material, social, and symbolical circumstances shape their practices.

This does not imply that older adults all play the same way or that their play is the direct and exclusive result of their age: older adults’ play is diverse, creative, and often surprising. I am not proposing to replace biological essentialism with social determinism. On the contrary, older adults’ play is remarkable in its deviation from expectations set by discourses on aging and the silver gamer narrative. It is nonetheless conducted in relation to these expectations, as well as anchored in the material conditions of old age.

An In-Depth Inquiry Into Older Adults’ Play

Driven by the interest of public institutions and healthcare professionals, the research on older adults and video games has expanded in several directions over the past two decades. My work is part of a wider effort by researchers to better grasp older adults’ ‘practices and relationships with video games. I draw on the frameworks and methods of social sciences, particularly the sociology of aging and Science and Technology Studies, to constitute an extensive dataset on older adults’ play. The combination of biographical interviews and large-scale ethnographic observations provides a far-reaching overview of older video game players. It continues and enriches the existing literature on older adults and video games by bringing together a variety of contexts and play styles, from smartphone apps and Facebook social games to online adventure games and esports competitions.

This extensive data collection, which is in and of itself a contribution to the field of aging and gaming studies, is a stepping-stone for a multifaceted analysis of older adults as video game players. Its starting point contends with the emergence of a silver gamer discourse that starkly contrasts with older adults' actual play practices and narratives. Here, my research draws on the critical strand of aging studies that highlight the normative and exclusionary dimension in contemporary discourses on aging. I contribute to the critical literature on aging and technology with a reflection on video games as instruments of discipline and self-work in old age, alongside devices such as smart watches or care robots.

My research is grounded in but not limited to this critique of the discourse and representations surrounding older adults' play. Once established that older video game players cannot be reduced to stereotypical "silver gamers", the analysis examines older adults' play and the ways in which video game play and the experience of aging are co-constituted. In this regard, my research makes two main contributions to the field. Firstly, older players' experience of video games is shaped by their social and cultural experience of old age, as illustrated by the patterns that characterize their play: self-awareness, solitude, discretion, stability in play practices, and sensitivity to time. Generally speaking, age, aging and the life course transform individuals' relationship with video game and digital play in decisive and complex ways. Secondly, video games provide older adults with an opportunity to protect and reconfigure their sense of self. As the devalued and reductive social position of old age threatens individuality, older adults may turn to video games to experience a form of age-independent identity confirmation. As players, they briefly overcome the stifling category of "old person" and get reacquainted with former social roles and identities held during adulthood, from the tech-savvy geek to the avid reader.

My research stands at the outskirts of its fields of reference. Video games are a niche topic in aging studies while older adults an understudied population in game studies. Yet a study of older adults' play sheds light on aging in general and its contemporary reconfigurations, as well as the shifting norms and representations in gaming cultures. By focusing on video game play, a specific and arguably uncommon practice among older adults, my work offers a different perspective on prominent and well-studied aspects of contemporary aging such as the rise of "successful aging"-adjacent discourses or the pathologization of old age.

A Critical Look At Aging, Technology, And Play

My research stands at the intersection of three fields of study: studies of aging (specifically critical gerontology), game studies (specifically the sociological study of players), and studies of technology (specifically Science & Technology Studies). The literature on older adults and video games provides a self-evident starting point. The emerging field of social sciences research on older adults who play video games, whose programme is articulated in De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's "Gerontoludic Manifesto" (2015), is fundamental in my research. It has provided data, methodological directions, and analytical frameworks regarding older adults'

play, its patterns and circumstances (Iversen 2016; Quandt, Grueninger, and Wimmer 2009; Pearce 2009; Nap, De Kort, and Ijsselstein 2009; Delwiche and Henderson 2013; De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2008; De Schutter 2011; De Schutter and Malliet 2014; Brown 2014). Broader research on video game players and particularly quantitative surveys such as the 2012 Ludespace study on video game players (Ter Minassian *et al.*, 2021) contextualize this rich literature. For its part, the medical and psychological literature (often aligned with the silver gamer discourse) has constituted a research object in the wake of Iversen's study of the constitution of older gamers as a scientific object (2016).

Secondly, the critical literature on aging sheds light on the conflicting expectations surrounding older players who are caught between "aging as decline" and "successful aging". At the intersection of critical gerontology, the sociology of aging, and Science & Technology Studies, scholars question both the representation of older adults as technologically illiterate and the enthusiasm that surrounds technology for the elderly (Domínguez-Rué and Nierling 2016; Sawchuk and Lafontaine 2015). This perspective emphasizes the creativity of older technology users in spite of the material constraints and biopolitical scrutiny they face (Peine *et al.* 2021). These "technogenarians" engage with old and new devices and uses to adapt to changing circumstances, maintain a sense of continuity and coherence, and foster an experience of comfortable aging (Joyce and Loe 2010).

Thirdly, the analysis of the fieldwork draws on game studies and specifically the literature on players and their practices (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). It contextualizes older players' preferences, practices, and experiences, as well as their marginal position within the field of video games, particularly in relation to gamer culture. Feminist game studies provide potent tools to examine the power relations and struggles that establish hierarchies among players and play styles (Thornham 2009; Shaw 2015; Vossen 2018; Coville 2018). They are particularly relevant insofar as a majority of older adults who play video games are women, for whom technology is the site of an unsettling intersection of age and gender. To widen the scope of the study, I have also drawn on play studies and leisure studies to situate video games within a broader context of leisure and free time (Bickel *et al.* 2005).

In The Loop Between Discourses And Practices

An investigation of older adults' video game play calls for a research agenda that questions the discourses that frame older adults' play. Users engage with technology in a specific discursive context that interacts with their practices as discourses and practices reinforce and adjust to each other. Discourses shape individuals' lives through the symbolical, social and material possibilities that they set when powerful actors promote and implement them (Foucault 1969). Following this logic, dominant representations of older players have concrete implications, affecting for instance whether (and which) gaming devices are available in spaces accessible to older adults such as nursing homes or day centres; how the relatives and friends of an older person react to their play; or to what extent game companies' marketing efforts and products

take older players into account. It is in that sense that the discursive context matters in older adults' play.

While discourses, representations, and rhetoric shape the field of possibilities for older players, they do not determine their experience with video games. Discourses neither faithfully reflect nor dictate social actors' behaviours. Technology users act in unexpected, disorderly, and even insubordinate ways, and social actors tend to disrupt decision-makers' and designers' expectations (Akrich 1989; Oudshoorn, Rommes, and Stienstra 2004). Older adults maintain a degree of agency and an ability to distance themselves from (and sometimes explicitly resist) dominant discourses. For instance, older adults have complex and circumspect attitudes towards discourses of aging, adopting but also circumventing their language and expectations (van Dyk *et al.* 2013). In their relationship with technology, older adults express a sense of agency, creativity, and intimacy that is not captured by stereotypical depictions of the elderly as technologically clueless (Joyce and Loe 2010). Consequently, following Hacking's (2004) call to associate a Foucauldian scrutiny of power and institutions with a Goffmanian attention to interactions and everyday life, I explore the interplay of discourses and practices with an eye to the "looping effect" through which people and the category to which they are assigned transform each other.

I combine discursive analysis with qualitative research to account for older players' lived experience and narratives of their play. My research draws primarily on ethnographic methods, particularly a combination of biographical semi-directive interviews with older adults who play video games on their own and the non-participant observation of video game workshops in aged care institutions. An ethnographic approach to older adults' play unsettles the discourses that surround and occasionally obfuscate their practice while making room for the diverse and complex experiences of video game play in old age. In that regard, I fall in line with the research on other marginalized groups of video game players in which scholars often turn to ethnography and related methods (e.g. Thornham 2011; Gray 2014).

This methodological choice, based on regular presence in two different fieldwork sites, does not fit with the classical definition of ethnography as a long-term immersion into a community or space. This departure from the ethnographic norm stems from the specificity of the study's object(s). Video game play in old age is often a domestic and offline activity, a practice that is solitary and sometimes outright hidden, and a peripheral activity that may take up a very small portion of the day or week. Ethnographies of domestic video game play such as Thornham's (2011) and Harvey's (2015) rely on interviews conducted at the informants' homes during which researchers encourage informants to play. A similar protocol was considered before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the latter imposed a shift from in-person to phone or online interviews. As for the video game workshops that take place in aged care institutions, they pose a distinct ethical challenge. Due to the difficulty in obtaining residents' informed consent without prying into their medical history or benefiting from the acute imbalance of power in total institutions, there were no formal interviews of workshop participants and thus no direct access to the perspective of these older players. I still chose to consider both fieldwork

sites rather than exclusively focus on interviews in order to acknowledge the experience of older players beyond the sixty-something “third age” seniors who are usually the most visible and vocal in discussions about old age and technology. The workshops’ observation also accounts for the significant role of institutional and supervised leisure in older adults’ experience, another of the distinctive features of video game play in old age.

An Ethnography Of Older Gamers

The first fieldwork site is the *Golden-Age Games* project, an association that promotes digital play among older adults through the organization of workshops and competitions for individuals over sixty years old. Workshops and local competitions generally take place in aged care institutions such as nursing homes⁵ and occasionally in other spaces such as senior centres and neighbourhood centres. Regional competitions are embedded into video game conventions and festivals alongside esports tournaments. The *Golden-Age Games* project is supervised by the association of the same name whose board of directors plans the workshops, secures funding, and promotes the initiative to potential partners and the general public. The workshops themselves are set up through third parties that hire civic service volunteers to facilitate the workshops, buy the necessary equipment, and find local institutions that are willing to host workshops. A national civic service⁶ provider with branches in nearly all major and midsize cities in mainland France is the main partner of the association. Its local coordinators supervise teams of volunteers who conduct the workshops, which are in most cases weekly, two-hour-long sessions bringing together six participants and two volunteers on average (*cf.* Appendix Table 7, “Observations in video game workshops for older adults: attendance”). Volunteers are often assisted by the host institutions’ leisure supervisors (also called activities directors) in the preparation and facilitation of the workshops. The workshops are expected to centre around Nintendo Wii’s *Wii Sports Bowling*, an exergame that simulates bowling on a motion sensor console, but they often include other forms of play and digital practices such as tablet games or *Google Street View* demonstrations (*cf.* Appendix Table 8, “Observations in video game workshops for older adults: activities”).

⁵The residential aged care system in France is structured into several categories depending on the type and degree of medical care needed by residents. The most common institution is the *Etablissement d’Hébergement pour Personnes Âgées Dépendantes* (Housing Institution for the Dependent Elderly, or *EHPAD*), a medicalized nursing home. It has a less medicalized counterpart, the *résidence-autonomie* (Residence for Autonomy), and several specialized offshoots such as day centres or units dedicated to people with Alzheimer’s. About 10% of people over 75 live in an *EHPAD* and roughly half of all *EHPAD* are state-run.

⁶Civic service (“*service civique*”) is a state-funded form of paid volunteering through which individuals between 18 and 25 (30 in specific cases) can participate in missions with a general interest vocation. In exchange, they receive a small salary as well as supervision and training in a given field. The six-to-twelve-month contracts are designed not to cost employers anything. The young people hired through this program are called “*volontaires*”, here translated as “volunteers”, even though they are technically paid workers (at around 500€ per month, a third of the French minimum wage). Most civic service experiences are supervised by specialized providers who dispatch volunteers among several institutions and associations; in *Golden-Age Games*’ case, their main partner is one of the major French civic service providers, and a representative of the provider sits on the association’s board of directors. After a decade of experimentation, the civic service in its current form was launched in 2010. According to the *Agence du service civique*, there were 140.000 volunteers in 2018.

Between February and May 2019, I visited *Golden-Age Games* workshops in thirty host institutions, covering a third of the institutions involved in the project in 2018-2019 (cf. Appendix Table 5, “Methodological overview of the observations conducted in video game workshops for older adults”, and Appendix Table 6, “Methodological overview of the additional observations related to video game workshops for older adults”). I attended workshops as a non-participant observer who was explicitly introduced as a researcher to organizers and participants⁷. In practice, I did everything but play games: I observed the workshops and took notes but also chatted with participants and residents, talked with coordinators over long car rides to and from rural nursing homes, set up chairs and moved tables around, carried items from one local branch to another, and hung out with volunteers during breaks and lunch times. During the workshops, I stood in the back of the room and typed field notes on my smartphone to make my observation as unobtrusive as possible. This strategy seemed to work, perhaps a little too well, in fact; organizers regularly assumed I was slacking off and did their best to put me to work, sending me to fetch participants or set up chairs.

My status, as a volunteer-aged envoy of the association with an academic research project, yielded different types of rapport with the people I met in the field. To local coordinators, I was a colleague working in the same field, but also an intermediary between organizers on the ground and their higher-ups. To volunteers, I was something of a fellow volunteer or intern, someone who occupied a similar position in the hierarchy of the workshops as them. For participants, I was either an enthusiastic visitor or an employee of the care home. Throughout this “grand tour”, I met with 172 participants, about thirty local coordinators and nursing home leisure supervisors, and fifty volunteers, as well as the association’s board members and partners. Even though I visited each city only once, my presence at regional competitions and associative events made me a familiar sight for several of the volunteers and coordinators.

The workshops took place in eighteen cities situated in six of the thirteen mainland French regions: Bretagne, Normandie, Pays de la Loire, Centre-Val-de-Loire, Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. The selection of cities and workshops was in part dictated by local coordinators’ availability and the workshops’ accessibility in terms of public transit (partially compensated by France’s relatively dependable public transit infrastructure, coordinators’ offers to drive me around, and French cities’ comparable walkability). The sample nonetheless

⁷I make a distinction between *Golden-Age Games* participants, who are older adults who attend the workshops (whether they play video games or not, although a large majority does play), and organizers, who are individuals involved in supervising participants’ play (either directly, like volunteers, the civic service provider’s local coordinators, and host institutions’ leisure supervisors, or indirectly, like *Golden-Age Games* board of directors, institutional partners who support and fund the project, and the civic service provider’s managers). In the field, the situation is not straightforwardly dichotomous: volunteers occasionally play, for instance, and some participants manage to take over the workshops from volunteers. Social actors regularly step outside their roles and their boundaries. Nonetheless, I maintain the distinction between organizers and participants in order to make visible the hierarchies that structure older adults’ play in institutional settings. It also reflects *Golden-Age Games* actors’ own understanding of the situation and draws attention to the complex relationship between those who are here to play and those who are here to make sure that others play. I further problematize and justify this distinction in chapter 3.

reflects the diversity of the service provider's geographic and social coverage. The cities I visited range from 15,000 to more than 150,000 inhabitants and include former industrial centres, cities with a large student population, agricultural hinterlands, residential suburbs, small mountain towns, *etc.* The vast majority of workshops took place in nursing homes (*EHPAD*), but some were hosted by *résidences-autonomie*⁸, neighbourhood centres, or senior centres. On the whole, workshop participants have a profile typical of nursing home residents, although there are significant differences among institutions. On average, the older adults who attend *Golden-Age Games* workshops are women in their eighties who live with a disability and/or a chronic illness.

Over the years, I established a relationship with the *Golden-Age Games* association whose representatives were quite sympathetic to my research and interested in its results. This relationship facilitated my access to the workshops and the silver gamer ecosystem in general. It has also allowed me to follow the *Golden-Age Games* project and its transformations over time from an insider perspective. But my proximity with one of the main actors in the field I study is challenging in many respects, albeit in a way that is familiar to ethnographers and social scientists. Beside the discomfort that comes from turning acquaintances and colleagues into an object of study, it is difficult to balance an appreciation for well-meaning and dedicated social workers and medical professionals with the critical stance I take regarding the silver gamer discourse and its implications.

Furthermore, my own position as a social scientist embedded in the field of old age is inextricably intertwined with the disciplining of older adults through the production of scientific knowledge (Katz 1996). Additionally, old age is embedded in power relations and disciplinary discourses (particularly in aged care institutions), and through my research as well as my association with *Golden-Age Games*, I occupy a position of power over my informants. This acknowledgement is all the more critical that my perspective on the *Golden-Age Games* project was restricted to observations and exchanges with organizers, with limited opportunities to talk with participants. Consequently, in addition to the study of power relations and institutional discourses in this first field site, I conducted a series of interviews that were focused on older adults' perspectives and accounts of their play.

Between November 2019 and June 2020, I interviewed sixteen older adults who play video games (*cf.* Appendix Table 1, "Methodological overview of the interviews conducted with older adults who play video games at home"). The recruitment relied on short posters and calls for interviews that were published on social media (including several senior-oriented Facebook groups, the Twitter account of the founder of a tech support website for older adults, and my own social media). The call was intentionally far-reaching and called for "people over sixty who play video games (on a computer, a phone, a tablet...)", specifying that the request included individuals "even if [they] don't play often!". The sixteen people who contacted me did so of their own initiative, although some were prompted by younger relatives who had heard about

⁸*cf.* footnote 5.

my research or seen my posters online. The sample is quite homogeneous in some respects, especially in terms of race (all respondents are white, except for a French-Armenian woman) and gender (two-thirds are women). Interviewees have otherwise relatively varied profiles in terms of age, social position, career, or family situation (*cf.* Appendix Table 6, “Interviewees’ profiles”). Among the respondents, whose ages range from 60 to 86, most are retired but some still work or are unemployed. Half of them report health problems and some live with disabilities or chronic illnesses. A third live alone, among which some are widowed, some are divorced, and some were never married or partnered. Two interviewees have no children and two-thirds of the interviewees have no grandchildren. Various career paths (and social classes) are represented: interviewees are or have been teachers, secretaries, electronics engineers, gardeners, finance executives, IT specialists, factory workers, at-home carers for dependent older adults, or bakery managers, among other jobs.

The semi-structured interviews, which lasted for an hour and a half on average, explore the life stories of respondents and the place of leisure, technology, and video games within it. The interview guide starts with a set of general biographical questions, moves on to the respondents’ experience of old age, then brings up leisure, technology, and finally video games. It includes questions about the respondent’s trajectory as a video game player, their practices, and their relationship with video game play. As is the case for many research projects conducted over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted and altered the fieldwork. Two interviews were conducted in person and at respondents’ homes right before the first national quarantine in March-April 2020. The remaining interviews were rescheduled, then conducted over the phone or video calls depending on the platform with which interviewees were most familiar and comfortable. Physical co-presence was out of the question, both out of respect for interviewees’ safety and health and because of the strict lockdown enforced over the spring of 2020 in France. Phone or online interviews come with struggles that are well known to qualitative researchers, including greater difficulty in building rapport or technical issues that regularly halt the conversation, but also with practical and methodological opportunities, such as facilitating the recruitment of respondents who would otherwise be reluctant or unable to sit through an-person interview (Irvine 2011; Deakin and Wakefield 2013). In my case, phone and online interviews did allow for a better inclusion of respondents who lived away from Paris or were homebound; they overall fitted more easily into interviewees’ lives and circumstances.

A Panorama Of Older Adults’ Video Game Play

Older adults who play video games have a specific experience of play that reflects the social and cultural, rather than the biological, experience of old age. I trace the patterns that characterize their play back to the circumstances of old age, which emerges as an undesirable and subordinated social position that aging individuals manage through strategic uses of their time and leisure. Older adults’ video game play reflects a social and cultural position of marginality that limits older players’ access to video game-related spaces and resources, but also fosters a disposition towards creative adaptation that facilitates older adults’ domestication

of video games. In that sense, older video game players engage in a distinctive form of play: not the stilted and health-focused project of the silver gamer, but the resilient and inconspicuous practices of those who finally make time for play.

The first chapter examines the position of older adults as unexpected and even incongruous video game players. The commonsensical notion that all video game players are young (and that, conversely, older adults do not play video games) limits older adults' ability to engage in video game play. Play carries several meanings that are problematic for older adults, who struggle to manage its symbolical association with childhood and its antagonism with work. Video game play in particular is challenging: it stands at odds with the representation of older adults as incompetent technology users while carrying a stigma of violence and addiction. In this context, many social actors find it difficult to frame older adults as potential video game players, even among individuals or groups who support video games in old age and among older players themselves. This situates older adults' play in a position of relative cultural invisibility that fosters a heightened self-awareness, a sense of discomfort, and regular attempts to hide or minimize one's play. It also limits older adults' ability to comfortably inhabit the identity of a video game player.

The second chapter argues that the onset of the "silver gamer", a revamped representation of older adults as video game players, has complicated the situation described in the previous chapter. The figure of the silver gamer provides an alternative to the representation of older adults as "impossible gamers" by casting older adults as an inspiring gaming audience. The chapter recounts the emergence of the silver gamer over the past decade in France⁹. Its discourse focuses on the purported benefits of video games for older adults and finds an echo among policymakers, academics, journalists, and gerontechnology investors. It defines old age as a process of biological decline that calls for technological intervention, a perspective that falls in line with the broader transformations of contemporary aging marked by neoliberal biopolitics. In this context, video games become technologies of the self that are expected to maintain older adults' cognitive and physical health, social inclusion, and digital literacy. In that sense, the figure of the silver gamer articulates the normative perspective of successful aging with video game play.

The third chapter analyzes the tensions between the silver gamer discourse and older players' relationship with video games. It explores the difficult implementation of the silver gamer

⁹The silver gamer discourse is not specific to France. For instance, the research of Iversen (2016; 2015) on the subject alternatively focuses on international academic literature and Danish mainstream media. My research is anchored in the specific context of France, which provides a thought-provoking illustration of the silver gamer's success. A factor in this success is the historical importance of the French State in the management of both culture and aged care, a situation that has fostered an interesting hybrid of public-funded and private commercial initiatives with a focus on leisure in old age. This context has made possible initiatives such as the *Golden-Age Games* association, a project that turned out to be an exceptional site for inquiry. As a result, my research straddles a fine line between acknowledging the cultural specificity of its results (a necessary precaution in ethnographic work, particularly when it is conducted in a Western country, given social sciences' history with ethnocentrism) and proposing an analysis that applies beyond France (thanks to the ethnographic literature on aging and video games that highlights transnational patterns).

discourse. The figure of the silver gamer has become an integral element of older adults' play, particularly in contexts where it has facilitated their access to game-related resources and identities (for instance when video game workshops are funded by public grants or when newspaper articles about an octogenarian streamer increase the visibility of the practice among older adults). It is nonetheless embedded in normative representations of old age and power relations that tend to antagonize older adults. The silver gamer discourse's focus on instrumental play and health maintenance is at odds with older players' preferences and experiences. Whether they play on their own at home or participate in video game workshops in nursing homes, older adults disengage from the silver gamer discourse and create alternative relationships with video games. But their relationship with the silver gamer narrative remains ambivalent. The silver gamer is a cumbersome companion for older adults who play video games, but also a strategic resource that helps them justify their practice or distance themselves from certain norms and representations of old age.

The fourth chapter takes a closer look at older adults who play video games and particularly at their careers as video game players. The previous chapters have established that the social and cultural context of old age is relatively unfavourable to video games, even in the seemingly positive silver gamer paradigm; yet a significant proportion of older adults play video games, sometimes quite regularly and intensively. This chapter identifies some of the elements that facilitate older adults' play and brings into view the work that older players conduct in order to sustain their practice. Older adults' first experience with video games is contingent on their previous contacts with technology and leisure, their exposure to video games and connections with other players, and video games' ability to fulfill an interest or a gap in their life. What proves decisive for older video game players is the possibility to attribute positive and personal meanings to video games and adapt them to their material circumstances. Leisure and technology are privileged sites of self-expression and identity management in old age, and video games are no exception. In that sense, older adults age in video game play, a practice through which they negotiate the changes and constraints that come with aging.

The fifth chapter investigates the practices of older adults who play video games and situates them within the population of video game players as a whole. Previous chapters have established that older players do not fit the expectations of the silver gamer discourse and its proponents; but they are not average gamers either. This chapter proposes an overview of older players' practices, cross-referencing data from quantitative studies on leisure practices, the ethnographic literature on older adults and video games, and the interviews and observations conducted in this research. At first glance, older adults' play seems to be relatively homogeneous, particularly when compared to the general population of players. Older adults play fewer games and are more heavily concentrated in the most popular genres (such as puzzles or digital adaptations of pre-existing games). This limited repertoire stems from the constraints that weigh on older adults' play (for instance, a high barrier to entry for many video game genres, a lack of gamers in their social network, and difficult access to gaming spaces and communities). Nonetheless, as the ethnographic data illustrates, older players manage to develop creative and personal forms of play despite their limited access to video game-related spaces and resources.

Older players are thus neither non-players nor silver gamers nor even average players in the statistical sense: they cultivate distinct play styles that fit in their life and their relationship with their aging selves.

The sixth chapter contends with a particularly meaningful feature of older adults' video game play: players' complex relationship with time. The ethnographic data sheds light on the ways in which older adults integrate video games into their everyday life as well as the extensive time work that older players conduct to that end. In that regard, older adults' video game play is shaped by the specific circumstances of old age not only in terms of material context or social identities but also in terms of temporalities. Older adults' experience of time is structured by a complex moral economy that reflects the changing norms surrounding old age as a "time without work" in a neoliberal work society (Kohli 1988). In this context, video game play becomes a strategic resource to negotiate expectations about the best way to spend one's time in old age. Alongside the fear of wasting their time and the desire to properly invest their time, older players express a particular attachment to video games as a way to make time for themselves and, at long last, play.

CHAPTER 1. CHALLENGING PLAY

The Uneasy Encounter Of Video Games And Older Adults

“Once you reach a certain age, you have to work, you don’t play anymore.”¹⁰”

A visitor in a Golden-Age Games workshop

During one of my very first visits to a *Golden-Age Games* workshop, I was nearly turned away at the front door of the aged care institution that hosted it. Instead of asking for directions to the civic service workshop (as I would learn to do later), I told the receptionist that I was “here for the video game workshop”, to which she answered, startled: “But Miss, this is a nursing home!” I encountered similar reactions, ranging from disbelief to derision, throughout my fieldwork and whenever I mentioned the topic of my doctoral research. Interviewees themselves were sometimes surprised to learn that I managed to find enough older video game players to write an entire dissertation about the phenomenon.

Older adults are unexpected video game players. In this chapter, I examine the common-sense notion that older adults do not play video games, tracing back its roots to the cultural status of old age in relation to play, leisure, and technology. Representations of play (including digital play) are not ageless: the contemporary conception of play has close ties with childhood while video games conjure the representation of the teenage or twenty-something gamer. It follows that old age and video games are culturally and symbolically at odds. Furthermore, the association of digital play with youth, addiction, and low-brow culture positions video games as an unexpected and even problematic leisure activity for older adults. Articles, reports, social media posts, and even academic publications on the topic often adopt an indulgent but slightly bewildered tone that emphasizes an opposition between the old and the young, the new, the digital.

I argue that conflicting representations of old age, play, and technology generate a sense of discomfort and diffidence in older players that is reflected in their ambivalence towards video games. Older adults who play video games have to contend with a cultural and discursive context in which their play does not make sense. This fosters a sense of unease among older players who struggle to reconcile their interest in video games with their social role and identity as older adults.

The chapter explores four sites of tension between old age and video game play. Play is a fraught activity for older adults because of its association with childhood (1.1.) and non-productivity (1.2.). Video game play is particularly challenging given its reputation as a dangerous technology (1.3.) and its uncertain status in the social hierarchy of cultural practices (1.4.).

¹⁰“Il n’y a pas d’âge pour jouer !”; “Passé un certain âge, faut travailler, on joue plus.”

1.1. Older Players For Children’s Games

The common-sense notion that older adults do not play video games is widespread, including in projects that promote “silver gaming” and among older players themselves. In this section, I investigate this assumption and its premises, drawing primarily on quantitative data collected in France. Although older adults’ play is particularly discreet, there is a significant proportion of people over sixty years old who play video games at least occasionally. Why, then, is it so difficult to picture older adults playing video games? The first element to consider is the cultural characterization of play as the prerogative of children, a position that complicates play in adulthood and particularly in old age.

In Search Of The Older Video Game Player

Are older players a rare occurrence? They do constitute a minority among older adults and among video game players. Quantitative data about the age of players remains difficult to come by, but existing studies all concur that individuals over sixty years old play the least compared to other age groups. Since the 2000s, the number of state-sponsored surveys that include questions about video games has noticeably increased (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). The French video game industry also regularly publishes reports and surveys about their customers. They all find that the over-sixty are the age group that plays the least, video game play diminishes with age, and age is one of the strongest predictive variables for video game play. However, the numbers themselves significantly vary from one survey to the next, reflecting different methodological choices.

According to the *Ludespace* survey, conducted in 2012, while nearly all teenagers (97%) have played a video game at least once during the year, the proportion of players falls to about 30% among adults over sixty years old. The practice decreases with age and this decrease is particularly visible for those who play often. 26% of 11- to 13-years-old play every day, a proportion that steadily diminishes with age and is around 6% for the 60+ age class. The *Pratiques culturelles des Français* survey constitutes an interesting source of comparison with *Ludespace*. Questions about video games have been included in the 1997, 2008, and 2018 iterations of the survey. But they have been rephrased over time, and most importantly, they contain the phrase “video games” rather than circumlocutions such as “games that you can play on a TV, a console, a computer...” or examples such as “card games, puzzle games, adventure games...” Many people who play games, especially popular games such as Windows *Solitaire* or online *Scrabble*, do not identify them as video games. This and other methodological choices account for the differences between *Ludespace* and *Pratiques culturelles* regarding the prevalence of video game play among the French. Indeed, the most recent *Pratiques culturelles* iteration makes a much lower estimation: according to the 2018 survey, only 17% of people over sixty have played at least once during the year (Pratiques culturelles des Français 2018). The *Pratiques culturelles en temps de confinement* study provides an additional source of data (Jonchery and Lombardo 2020). The *Pratiques culturelles en temps de confinement* compares

Pratiques culturelles des Français with another survey, *Conditions de vie et aspirations*. The first survey collected data over a whole year, in 2018, and the second collected data during the first quarantine in France (six weeks in March-April 2020). Even though it covers a much shorter period, *Conditions de vie* finds a proportion of video game players among the 60+ that is twice as high as the proportion of players among the 60+ according to *Pratiques culturelles* (34% compared to 17%).

The discrepancy between these surveys highlights how much methods matter in research on older adults and technology. The exceptional circumstances of the first quarantine play a role, but it also matters that *Pratiques culturelles* is conducted over the phone while *Conditions de vie* is conducted online. Given the significant inequalities in access to digital technologies for several groups and patterns of co-occurrence in digital practices, an online sample tends to over-represent older adults who play video games. The annual study published by the SELL, the French video game editors' professional organization, shares similar features with even more striking results. The survey, conducted by a private research institute, uses a non-representative sample recruited online. In this context, there is a high risk of over-representation of video game players in the sample; and indeed *L'Essentiel des jeux vidéo 2020* reaches unprecedentedly high estimations regarding older players. According to the survey, 52% of people over 55 years old play video games (at least once during the year). This is aggravated by industry statistics' tendency to use wide definitions of "video game players" that lump together all individuals who have played at least once during the past year.

Additionally, surveys often merge all older adults into a single category of "sixty and over", a methodological choice that leads to a loss of information. This category spans over thirty years and lumps age groups with distinct experiences, especially regarding ICT, into a single "large undifferentiated, unquestioned statistical cohort" (Sawchuk 2016:8). Age groups within the 60+ category have significantly different behaviours, as Friemel's (2016) work on the Internet use of Swiss older adults illustrates. Regular Internet use strongly decreases with age, but there is a notable difference between the 10% of 80- to 85-years-old and the 40% of 70- to 75-years-old who are frequent Internet users. The construction of a very wide age category for older adults is a by-product of the "[a]geism [...] embedded in the frameworks or protocols developed within disciplines" (Sawchuk 2016:8). Finally, the source of the surveys also shapes their results. The average age of video game players is often much higher in industry surveys than in scientific or state-sponsored statistics. This coincides with large game companies' emphasis on the "average player" as a casual, middle-aged one in order to widen their imagined consumer base. Indeed:

[o]ver the years, the media, the industry, and institutions have put forward new statistics setting the average of players between 30 and 40 years. [...] This shift in the average age of players according to the media, institutional and industrial fields thus acts as a decisive argument in the legitimization of video games as a cultural object. (Meunier 2017:384, my own translation)

Similar issues arise regarding the study of older adults' video game play practices, particularly regarding what they play (in terms of genres and titles) and how they play (on what device, how long, how often, where, *etc.*). The only source of quantitative data regarding the French context is the *Ludespace* survey (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). Coupled with the observations and interviews conducted during this research, it paints a cursory picture of older adults' video game play as quite uniform although not devoid of creativity. While the topic calls for in-depth analysis (*cf.* Chapter 5), a rapid characterization of older adults' play is necessary to contextualize the forthcoming analysis.

In a word, older adults have a profile that is quite similar to that of the average player, only less diverse. The large majority of older players exclusively play patience games, card games, word and number games, and brain teasers, while no other genre (such as First-Person Shooters, music and dancing games, or adventure games) scores more than 5% among older players (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). Qualitative research on older adults and video games confirms or completes statistical results that suggest that older adults mostly play alone, often on a computer or smartphone, and frequently albeit in short bursts and with long breaks between periods of play (Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Kaufman *et al.* 2016). The sample of participants in Allaire *et al.*'s (2013) study on cognitive training and video games provides an interest point of data. The researchers recruited 140 older adults on a voluntary basis in senior centres, residences, and religious centres. Before conducting their study, Allaire *et al.* asked participants (all independently living older adults, with a majority of women and an average age of 77) about their pre-existing video game practices. Nearly two-thirds of the sample play video games at least occasionally, and a third play at least once a week. They mostly play digital card games, Wii games, and puzzles (such as crosswords and sudoku).

But the ethnographic literature also shows that statistical data tend to downplay the versatility and creativity of older adults' play. During fieldwork, I observed that while most interviewees play puzzle games (*e.g.*, *Candy Crush*) and digital versions of traditional games¹¹ (*e.g.* digital sudoku or *Solitaire*) on a similar schedule (short, daily play sessions), they engage with video games in various ways (*cf.* Appendix Table 3, "Interviewees' video game play: game genres and titles" and Appendix Table 4, "Interviewees' video game play: material configuration"). Jacqueline cares about the privacy of her play and therefore plays at night when everyone else is asleep, for instance, and Yvette initially switched from reading novels to playing (tablet) sudoku to adapt to short-term memory loss. It is also critical to acknowledge older adults who play (or who have played) games outside of the puzzle/card/quiz category, as illustrated by the

¹¹The notion of "traditional games" is a cumbersome one, but it is widely used in the literature and particularly quantitative surveys on leisure practices. It is used in contrast to the category of video games; it encompasses board games, card games, pen-and-paper games, *etc.* Digital versions of traditional games include digital sudokus, *Solitaire*, online *Scrabble*, or crosswords app, for instance. This category has uncertain boundaries: for instance, *Wii Bowling* is technically the digital version of a traditional game, but it is rarely categorized as such in surveys or analyses, which describe it as an exergame or a sports game. But the notion remains useful in the comparative study of digital and non-digital forms of play.

story of Martine, who has been playing the adventure *Zelda* games since 1992 and has been working towards opening a YouTube channel to stream *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

In summary, there is enough quantitative and qualitative data available to establish that there are older video game players. They are a minority, but a sizable one. However, methodological choices create important discrepancies between surveys' results, and it is therefore difficult to estimate the proportion of older adults who play video games (or the proportion of individuals over sixty among video game players). It remains uncertain whether the proportion of older adults who play at least occasionally is less than a fifth, more than half, or anything in between. Existing qualitative studies on older adults who play video games have often been conducted with relatively small sample sizes and varied methodologies that make comparison difficult; in any case, there has been no study of that kind in France. There is also a lack of longitudinal studies that would distinguish cohort/generation effects from the effects of aging. Overall, the experiences and practices of older adults remain understudied, although research initiatives such as the Gerontoludic Society have led to major advances on this topic (De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015).

An Overview Of Older Adults' Leisure

Older adults' digital play takes place in the wider context of free time and leisure in old age. An overview of older adults' leisure sets the stage for this chapter's argument about video game play as a challenging activity in old age. The data presented here contextualizes digital play by situating it in relation to other activities (in terms of meanings, space, or time allocation), with the added benefit of preventing the analysis from exaggerating video games' importance in the eyes of their older players.

Leisure becomes more prevalent in retirement. As the time dedicated to formal employment recedes, free time and time dedicated to leisure increase (INSEE¹² 2011). The research on time use in old age still notes the continued importance of obligations and informal work (such as domestic work or care for relatives). Moreau & Stancanelli's (2022) work on INSEE's 2009-2010 time use survey compares a sample of retirees with a sample of workers in their fifties to estimate the effects of retirement on individuals' time. Retirement involves spending slightly more time sleeping and eating than pre-retirement, but the time freed up by the absence of work (and commuting) is mostly reinvested in leisure and domestic work. A retiree spends on average 5h19 on leisure activities a day (compared with 2h46 for workers) and 4h13 on domestic work (compared with 2h10 for workers)¹³. Other activities such as care (for instance childcare or caring for a sick relative), socializing, and spending time on the computer take up slightly more time (about ten more minutes per day on average each) in retirement. Some forms of leisure are widespread among individuals over sixty, particularly domestic and solitary leisure activities

¹²INSEE (“*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*”) is the French statistics bureau.

¹³The division between leisure and housework is complicated by the fact that gardening and home improvement are categorized as domestic work although they may qualify as leisure in some circumstances.

such as watching television, playing solitaire, or gardening (Bickel *et al.* 2005). For instance, older adults are by far the age group who watches the most television; 90% of 60+-year-olds watch television daily, compared with 58% of 15-24-years-old. Furthermore, some leisure activities are less prevalent among older adults than in other age groups, such as going to a show or playing video games (INSEE 2008).

Leisure in old age is not a monolithic experience. Firstly, the intersection between age and other social positions creates different relationships and opportunities in terms of leisure. There are strong gendered differences in retirees' timetables. Men's involvement in housework increases significantly more than women's, but women continue to provide considerably more housework than men. Moreover, the increase in men's domestic work is accounted for in large part by a heightened involvement in gardening and home improvement. Men and women spend similar amounts of time on leisure before retirement (2h46 per day on average) but the gap widens after retirement (women have 4h59 and men 5h39 of leisure per day).

Secondly, the category of older adults (and most statistical surveys) lumps together several generations. In their comparison of different cohorts of older adults, Bickel *et al.* (2005) show that new generations of retirees have higher participation rates in leisure activities than previous generations. They note the existence of important differences between different age groups in the "sixty years old and above" category. Recent generations of older adults are increasingly invested in a "body culture, a quest for sociability and escapism" expressed in leisure activities related to sports or tourism. The importance of leisure in old age has steadily increased over the past decades, illustrating the advent of a "leisure civilization" that has transformed French society in depth over the second half of the 20th c. (Dumazedier 1962). Older adults do have a specific relationship to leisure, but this specificity is declining over time (Caradec 2012).

As a result of age effects and cohort effects, older adults share a specific relationship with leisure. Comparing five age groups, from 45-54-years-old to 85+-years-old, Renaut (2011) identifies several patterns. Older cohorts take part in cultural and artistic outings (such as going to the movies or visiting a museum) much less often than younger cohorts: 69% of 45-to-54-years-old have gone out at least once in 2008, compared with 16% of 85+-years-old. As for social activities such as board game play or having dinner with friends, a stable proportion of individuals do it regularly (about a quarter of all age groups), but the proportion of individuals who have rarely or never done it over the past year significantly rises (from 24% for 45-54-years-old to 44% for 85+-years-old). A broad category of leisure activities such as gardening, home improvement, and arts & crafts becomes increasingly frequent between 45 and 64 years old, and then decreases: two-thirds of 55-64-years-old participate in these activities regularly, but 59% of 85+-years-old do not engage in them at all. There is a similar dynamic regarding being a member of an association or volunteering group, although with less amplitude: almost half of 65-74-years-old belong to an association, compared with a quarter of 85+-years-old.

Rather than considering video game play as an isolated object, I have integrated questions about leisure and play in the observation grid and the interview guides. I have noted signs and traces

of other leisure activities in the rooms and institutions where *Golden-Age Games* take place and charted interviewees' involvement in leisure and play throughout their life. This approach has highlighted the work needed on older players' part to make room for video games in their everyday life. Isabelle, a sixty-year-old Parisian former financial analyst, volunteers for a nearly full-time and highly demanding job. She still manages to go to the gym once a week, have lunch and visit art museums with friends, and host board game parties for her family every Sunday. Video games fit into a specific moment in her busy life: she plays the management game *Cooking Fever* on her smartphone whenever she takes a break at work. Yvette has a different profile: she is in her eighties, has been retired for decades, and now lives in a senior residence. She has stopped attending cultural conferences and the synagogue, pivoting towards new leisure activities that fill her day: listening to the radio, doing crossword puzzles and sudokus (sometimes on her tablet), playing *Scrabble* with her next-door neighbour, watching game shows on television, and visiting her daughter once a week. Contrary to the assumption, sometimes expressed by social workers in aged care institutions, that older adults are bored and thus willing to try nearly anything, they often have access to various forms of leisure. The residents of institutions that host *Golden-Age Games* project often brush off volunteers' calls to participate in the workshops because they are otherwise engaged (by a phone call, a walk outside, or a card game of *belote*). Even in aged care institutions where access to leisure is more limited and supervised, older players fit video games into their schedules in an intentional way.

Play: Area Reserved For Children

The uncertainty that surrounds older adults' video game play comes in large part from the association of play with youth and childhood in contemporary societies. It frames play in adulthood and old age as an unexpected and even incongruous event. This identification of play with childhood underlies others' hesitant and occasionally disapproving reactions to older adults' play. In reaction, older players tend to be very discreet about their play, either hiding it or framing it in a way that distances it from play.

The conceptualization of play as the typical activity of children has its roots in the psychological perspectives that have shaped modern conceptualizations of play. Developmental psychology frames play as an essential element of "growing up", an evolutionary mechanism that facilitates the child's path towards adulthood. Psychological approaches of the 20th c. particularly emphasize play as an experience through which children train themselves to accept constraints. Vygotsky (1930) interprets playful behaviours in children as a way to appease impossible desires and learn conceptual thought. A decade later, Piaget (1945) describes play as a behaviour that allows children to dominate or compensate for reality by assimilating it during brief periods, which also results in the formation of imagination and rational thought. Bettelheim (1971) posits that children express themselves and manage difficult emotions through play to assimilate the limits of their environment. This paradigm of play has provided the foundations of what Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the rhetoric of progress, which frames play as a means of individual development. Although the rhetoric of progress sometimes expands

into adulthood and promotes lifelong self-improvement, the legacy of developmental psychology has durably associated play with youth and learning. This has direct consequences for adult play:

If research finds that play supports educational and social development in children, then it follows that adults will “grow out” of play once developmental milestones have been reached. The adult who does not, or refuses to, grow out of play is considered abnormal, stunted, or even unhealthy. (Brown and Stenros 2018:217)

Childhood is widely associated with play and *vice versa*, as interviewees’ life stories illustrate. When asked to describe the place of play in their life over time, they portray childhood as “the period of play”, to quote Jacqueline. As a young girl, she married a widower who already had children, and she spent a lot of time playing with her stepdaughters because, in her words, “I was still in the period of play¹⁴”. Nicole describes childhood as a world of play: “when I was a child, we played a lot with a lot of children, we played in wastelands, we made up our world, a whole world, we made up lots of games¹⁵”.

Children’s play holds considerable cultural value. In their narratives, interviewees frame children’s play as an activity to encourage and reward. In fact, those who confess that they find it difficult to participate in or enjoy young relatives’ play see it as a shortcoming on their part as educators. In interviews as well as during *Golden-Age Games* workshops, adults regularly refer to a notion that emerged in the middle-class culture of Western European societies during the Industrial Revolution: play is “the child’s work”, a valuable endeavour and even a duty to children who train for a productive and orderly life through play (Cross 2008). Marie explains: “I played a lot with my children. Because I think that, through play, you can learn a lot of things. It teaches them to follow the rules, it teaches them to lose.¹⁶” In line with the biological and ethological references of the rhetoric of progress, Alain frames play as a universal learning tool: “It’s often through play. For instance, cats, little kittens, they learn how to hunt by playing, they learn how to fight by playing, how to defend themselves.¹⁷”

The Uneasy Play Of Adults

Growing up and into adulthood marks a change in the relationship with play. For those who raise children, parenthood plays a major role in the renunciation of play: “when I had kids, I had other stuff to do¹⁸”. Play, like leisure activities in general, is shaped by the life course and

¹⁴“J’étais encore dans l’époque du jeu.”

¹⁵“Moi quand j’étais petite, on jouait beaucoup avec beaucoup d’enfants, on était dans les terrains vagues, on se faisait un monde, tout un monde, on s’inventait des tas de jeux.”

¹⁶“J’ai beaucoup joué avec mes enfants. Parce que je trouve que par le jeu on peut apprendre énormément de choses. Ça permet de respecter les règles, ça permet d’apprendre à perdre.”

¹⁷“C’est souvent par le jeu. Par exemple les chats, les petits chatons, ils apprennent à chasser en jouant, ils apprennent à se battre en jouant, se défendre.”

¹⁸“Quand j’avais des enfants, j’avais autre chose à faire.”

life events, including parenthood (Hendricks and Cutler 2003). The arrival of children, especially the first child, brings about a reallocation of time and resources for parents. Leisure recedes, especially for mothers, and children-oriented or children-compatible activities take up most of the available free time. In her study of women's leisure in Britain, Rosemary Deem (1986) identifies "mothers of dependent children who also have male partners" as the most constrained group in terms of access to leisure (1986). Summarizing the literature on the topic, she concludes: "the periods when women have small children, under or over school age, are the most constraining so far as out-of-home leisure and in-house undisturbed leisure are concerned" (p. 126).

The arrival of children in one's life marks the beginning of an ambivalent relationship with play rather than the abrupt end of it. Playing with children in adulthood holds a complex status in terms of leisure. Because they sometimes strongly resemble (care) work, such activities constitute a specific kind of play that challenges common definitions of both leisure and play. For adults, playing games is deeply rooted in family life, as Coavoux and Gerber (2016) illustrate with their study on video games and traditional games¹⁹ in the life course. In contrast with video games, mostly inscribed in relationships with peers of the same age and outside of the familial circle, traditional games are grounded in inter-generational, familial sociability. They are pervasive in childhood, become rarer in adolescence (except in circumstances such as family reunions and vacations), and come back with parenthood. Traditional games are so closely connected to this context that, when adults play, it is often with children: only 13% of the study participants who had played traditional games during the year had not played with children.

The goodwill towards children's play typically does not extend to adulthood. Play's multiple connotations (with childhood, idleness, unseriousness) sit at odds with the expectations and representations of adulthood. This assertion calls, of course, for nuance: the assignment of play to childhood is a cultural and historical phenomenon that is far-reaching but in no way universal. Play has not always been considered to be primarily children's domain, and this is made abundantly clear by accounts of religious play, sports, gambling, or carnival play (Geertz 1972; Sutton-Smith 1997; Reith 2002). Nonetheless, in contemporary contexts, adults who engage in playful activities often construct alibis: socially acceptable motivations that make play compatible with adult social roles and allow them to play without embarrassment (Deterding 2018). Such alibis frame play as a means to fulfill "adult responsibilities be it that it is part of gainful labour or providing for others; be it that it nurtures their health and productive faculties; be it that it serves communal cohesion or artistic expression; or be it that it is re-grounded as charity or a joke" (p. 264).

The inappropriateness of adult play shapes the experience of older adults who play video games. One of its most direct manifestations is older players' insecurity regarding their play. As De Schutter and Vanden Abeele (2010:4) report in their study on older players,

¹⁹*cf.* footnote 11.

Some respondents indicated that they felt insecure about how their playing habit would be perceived by their non-playing peers [...] They often did not talk to other older adults about it, and they indicated that they would approach the subject very carefully if they would ever choose to do so.

The association of play with childhood proves problematic but also self-evident and beyond question: rather than arguing that people of all ages can play video games, “Bernadette (62) quoted a bible reference – Marc 10:14-15 – in defense of her hobby: ‘He who does not become like these children will not enter the kingdom of God’” (p. 4). Older players face disapproval from others, particularly their peers and relatives, over an activity derided as immature. In a case study of German video game players over sixty years old, Quandt *et al.* (2009:43) note that the interviewees have “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.’” The use of that specific term is reported in several studies, as well as older adults’ belief that video games are inappropriate for them because of their age (De Schutter *et al.* 2014; Neufeldt 2019). In the interviews and *Golden-Age Games* workshops, the same pattern emerges. Most older players never talk about their play with others, and several have faced adverse reactions when they did. Martine, for instance, explains other people’s incredulity regarding her play by noting that “For them, playing means you’re a child.²⁰”

The association of play with childhood poses an additional, specific problem for older adults who play video games, as discourses about aging have historically used the phrase “second childhood” to describe a depreciated experience of old age (Hockey and James 1995). The metaphor of childhood carries connotations of dependency, limited mental abilities, and vulnerability, and describes old age as a reversion back to pre-adulthood. Such characterization carries with it the suspicion of the fourth age, mental decline, and behavioural issues, that threatens an individual’s status as a person in the eyes of others. This exacerbates older adults’ caution regarding play, although they sometimes subvert the threat of second childhood and reclaim a “right to play” and be a silly old person (Barret and Naiman-Sessions 2016). But playing remains a fraught activity that might trigger suspicions of failing mental health. A respondent of De Schutter *et al.*’s (2014:1180) study on older gamers illustrates that fear: “When I play my Gameboy outside of my home I see people looking at me as if I’m crazy. They think I’m demented”. In order to avoid negative reactions to their inappropriate play, older adults tend to keep it under wraps, like Jacqueline: “But no, I don’t talk about play because I believe, again, for me it’s an intimate and personal experience. [...] No, if I happen to talk about it, it’s because I’m saying, “I play”, almost apologetically.²¹” In the context of aged care institutions, in which many residents are engaged in a constant struggle to distance themselves from the dreaded fourth age, the stakes are high. When organizers describe participants with the vocabulary of childhood (“rowdy”, “sulky”, “disobedient”), it is rarely in a manner that

²⁰“Pour eux, jouer c’est être enfant”.

²¹“Mais non, je ne parle pas du jeu parce que j’estime, là aussi, pour moi c’est une expérience intime et personnelle. [...] Non, s’il m’arrive d’en parler, c’est que je dis « Je joue », presque en m’excusant.”

reinforces older adults' personhood. During a *Golden-Age Games* workshop, for instance, an organizer tells me that older adults perk up when they play card games, "it's just like children²²". In another institution, a medical professional who sometimes attends the workshops explains to me that older adults are "like children with a toy²³" with new technology.

The uneasy status of older adults' play brings to the fore the importance of identity management and reconfiguration in old age. It is an unsettling experience insofar as the changes associated with aging challenge individuals' perception of themselves and social roles (Caradec 2009). In interactions and relationships with institutions, older adults are progressively stripped of the identities that were central in their adult lives (for instance "teacher", "father", "tennis enthusiast", *etc.*), which become subsumed under the devalued identity of "old person":

The social roles of 'old people' or 'elderly' available to individuals are defined first and foremost by loss, by the (negatively perceived) gap with adulthood [...]: old age and specifically very old age are currently constituted at best as a useless age, and at worst (and most often) as a burden for society. (Mallon 2007:48)

This constitutes a structuring tension in the experience of old age. In response to this threat, older adults engage in "aging work" in order to maintain the integrity of their selves (Mallon 2007). Aging individuals adopt various strategies that often revolve around continuity and coherence, although some embrace old age as an opportunity to reinvent themselves (Membrado 2010). The emphasis on continuity does not mean that identity is fixed throughout old age, but results from individuals' negotiation with the changes and stigma of old age. In their ethnography of a senior residence and a nursing home, Gamliel and Hazan (2006) shed light on the ways in which older adults draw on available resources to manage this stigma. In the senior residence, individuals draw on their former social roles and particularly their former careers to maintain a stable identity. In the nursing home, a total institution that activates the stigma of old age in particularly potent ways, this strategy is not an option. Instead, residents reclaim their individuality through gossip and name-calling in what amounts to "playful bargaining over their identities" (p. 363). Older adults' identity struggles highlight the structuring role of devalued images of aging.

²²"C'est comme les enfants."

²³"Comme des enfants avec un jouet."

1.2. Play Without Work? Video Games in Retirement

The ambivalent relationship of older adults with video games is further complicated by the exacerbated importance of leisure in old age. In a period of the life course associated with the end of the working life, leisure assumes special significance, and decisions about leisure activities carry additional meanings. In that context, playing video games prompts questions about the best use of one's time and the moral imperative to remain productive in old age.

Wasting Time: Play As A Threat To Productivity

The disapproving comments that frame play as an inappropriate endeavour for adults refer not only to the association of play with childhood but also to the representation of play as an unproductive activity. Van Leeuwen and Westwood (2010:6) note that “the connection of play to morally rejected idleness has given it, in the context of adulthood, a rather dubious reputation”. Brown's (2014) respondents struggle with digital play in a life without work, as interviewee June's account illustrates. On one hand, she notes with satisfaction that “When I was a child, my main focus was to play, but as an adult, my main focus has been work, so stopping working ... not working is almost like play again.” On the other, “that's the biggest thing for me, that I have to remind myself that it's okay to play” (p. 90).

The theme of play as a waste of time runs through the interviews. Relatives frown upon players' decision to prioritize play over other activities, as in Bernard's case: “[Have you ever faced negative reactions because someone was watching you play or listening to you talk about video games?] Ah yes, yes, yes. My eldest son. [...] So, he must think we have better things to do.”²⁴ Isabelle mentions that she faces “just a little bit of” disapproval regarding her games, and when asked why, she elaborates “Maybe thinking that, that it's useless²⁵”. Concern about play as an unreasonable way to spend time is expressed by others (mostly relatives and friends), but also internalized by players themselves. Many express a feeling of guilt regarding video games, to the point that Bernard compares playing video games with smoking cigarettes: “Well, I don't smoke anymore, but I play, it's a bit similar. It's less enjoyable than smoking, it's true, but [laughs]. A guilty pleasure.”²⁶ Bernard struggles with this feeling and explores it at length during the interview: ““You've got nothing better to do', you know, it's always the same thing. [...] When I play, there's always this very unpleasant feeling of shame when I'm playing, when I see myself playing video games.”²⁷ To deal with this sense of shame, Bernard frames play as a form of downtime that ensures heightened productivity the rest of the time: “And when I'm playing, I can accept it when I set myself a time limit, thinking ‘I'm relaxing, I'll work better

²⁴ “[Est-ce qu'il vous est déjà arrivé de faire face à des réactions négatives parce que quelqu'un vous voyait jouer ou vous entendait parler de jeu.] Ah oui, oui oui. Mon fils aîné. [...] Alors il doit penser qu'on a mieux à faire.”

²⁵ “Peut-être le fait de penser que, que c'est inutile”.

²⁶ “Bon, je ne fume plus, mais je joue quoi, c'est un peu pareil. Ça fait moins plaisir que de fumer, c'est vrai, mais [rires]. Un plaisir coupable.”

²⁷ “T'as rien de mieux à faire', quoi, c'est toujours pareil. [...] Jouer, il y a toujours un sentiment extrêmement désagréable de honte lorsque je joue, lorsque je me vois en train de jouer.”

afterward.’ [...] I’m taking a break, you know.²⁸” But play remains an indulgence that displaces other, more legitimate activities: “Yes, always, I’m always guilty of playing instead of doing something better.²⁹” Michel concurs: “[Video games] come last because despite being quite lackadaisical, I’m still a man of duty.³⁰” Another source of concern, especially among the relatives and partners of older players, pertains to the management of family time. Jacqueline mentions that her play is somewhat of a sore spot in her relationship with her husband:

My husband says ‘She plays video games’ [laughs]. [...] I don’t know if you see what I mean. He thinks I play too much, he’d rather have me talking with him all the time. [...] But he says it in quite a derogatory way. Well. The dogs bark but the caravan goes on [laughs].³¹

Golden-Age Games workshop participants, whose play is encouraged by institutions and supervised by social workers, benefit from a strong alibi that acts as a buffer against comments on the inappropriateness of their play. But disapproval still finds its way into the workshops:

[field notes from a workshop in a nursing home] A man in his seventies comes to visit a resident and arrives in the middle of the video game workshop. He seems to know one of the participants, perhaps as a friend or a distant relative. He sits down near her, exchanges a few words, and watches the game in silence. [...] A participant tells the woman the visitor seems to know: “There is no age limit to play!”. He sternly says “Once you reach a certain age, you have to work, you don’t play anymore.”³²

In Khalili-Mahani *et al.*’s (2020) study, in which older adults are invited to attend video game workshops, there are similar reactions among respondents, who were recruited *via* a mailing list addressed to people interested in wellness and health studies. Indeed,

two participants dropped out after the first session: one, because our activity was not geared towards brain health; second, because the individual preferred to exercise. Both these individuals had come to the class with a negative attitude towards games, as being wasteful, and mind-numbing. (p. 240)

The preoccupation with older players’ use of their time finds its roots in the complex relationship between play, time, and work. Play historically carries a variety of cultural and moral connotations: it evokes idleness, transgression, irrationality. Play consists of the implementation of alternative rules and hierarchies that might always overflow the boundaries

²⁸“Et lorsque je joue, je peux l’accepter quand je limite ça dans le temps, en me disant ‘Je me repose, je reprendrais mieux mon travail après.’ [...] Je fais une pause, quoi.”

²⁹“Oui, toujours, je suis coupable de jouer au lieu de faire quelque chose de mieux.”

³⁰“[Les jeux vidéo] passent après, parce que bien qu’étant très dilettante, je suis quand même un être de devoir.”

³¹ “Mon mari dit « Elle joue » [rires]. [...] Je sais pas si vous voyez ce que je veux dire. Il trouve que je joue trop, il préférerait que je lui parle tout le temps. [...] Mais c’est assez péjoratif dans sa bouche. Bon. Les chiens aboient, la caravane passe [rires].”

³²“Il n’y a pas d’âge pour jouer !”; “Passé un certain âge, faut travailler, on joue plus.”

of the play space, and as such it is a potential threat to the social order. Authorities have long concerned themselves with mitigating this threat through control and prohibition (Cousseau 2016). But it is its economic value, or lack thereof, that makes play problematic in societies structured by work that highly value utilitarianism and productivity. Canonical definitions of play have emphasized play's antagonistic relationship with work, although scholars of play remain careful to note that play is neither fully separated from nor entirely opposed to work. In their definitions of play, Caillois' *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958) and Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) respectively name disconnect from material interests and non-productivity among the core characteristics of play. The fundamental un-seriousness of play is indeed a matter of scholarly and cultural consensus: "there is still widespread cultural salience to the idea that playing games is the opposite of work, and when we want someone to be serious and start working, we say things like 'quit playing around' or 'stop playing games'" (Simon 2017:9). Sutton-Smith (1997:201) identifies the conceptualization of play as a frivolous activity as "the strongest and most lasting of all the rhetorics of play in the past four hundred years", drawing attention to "the role of both religion and the work ethic in the denigration of play as a waste of time, as idleness, as triviality, and as frivolity". Such understandings of play are historically situated. Debates about play predate the 19th c., as Cousseau's (2016) or Reith's (2002) work of the censure of different forms of play throughout history illustrates. But the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism in the Western world intensified discussions about the non-productivity of play.

Play encompasses a fundamental ambivalence that complicates a straightforward condemnation of play as a useless endeavour. Some forms of play and playfulness can fit within the work ethic. Alongside the rhetorics of frivolity, the rhetorics of play as progress imbue play with educational virtues. The dominant perspective on play, especially among authorities, institutions, political elites, and supervisors of various sorts, is thus ambiguous. It is wary of non-productive, unruly forms of play but also eager to enrol instrumental play for extrinsic purposes (Henricks 2016). This ambivalence is the foundation on which the promotion of older adults' play lies. Still, despite its success, the promotion of play as a productive endeavour coexists with persistent defiance towards play as an indulgence and a waste of time.

The complex relationship of play with productivity in a capitalist society is in large part a conflict about time and its proper use. The choice to spend time on a non-productive, aimless activity is fundamentally problematic. In contemporary labour-structured societies, the question of how individuals use their time is charged with political and moral meaning. Idleness raises questions: it is not necessarily bad (particularly when it lets individuals regain energy in order to be more efficient and productive in the long term), but it remains suspect. Individuals have to manage material, social, but also moral considerations to make room for play in their everyday life (Ter Minassian and Boutet 2016). For younger adults who are still in the workforce, it is the tension about the proper place of play in a life of work that challenges video game play: "one of the problems for the adult gamers [...] resides in the temporal structure of working lives where every hour has meaning or purpose" (Thornham 2011:30). Video games

exacerbate the anxieties associated with play as a time drain and a threat to self-control as well as productivity.

Making Room For Leisure And Play In A Work Society

The tensions surrounding video game play reflect the complex status of play and leisure in a society structured by work. Play and leisure are two distinct concepts and their juxtaposition in this part of the analysis does not rely on the assumption that they are similar or that one can be subsumed under the other. However, playing video games falls under both categories at once: it is an experience of play, or rather an activity that carries the potential for a playful experience, as well as a leisure activity. Moreover, it is thought-provoking to compare the role of play and leisure in contemporary capitalist societies. While the concepts are distinct, they both carry an association with idleness and a contrarian relationship with work, and thus an ambivalent social and cultural status. In contemporary contexts, leisure and play occupy a marginal place, “peripheral to the main business of life: work” (Rojek 1992:1). They become defined in relation to work, taking on the role of a counterpart, an opposite, or an absence of work. In his “Notes on the Concepts of Play and Leisure”, Giddens (1964) shows that leisure, play, and work are structuring elements in the organization of industrial societies, but that the boundaries between these activities are nonetheless remarkably porous. In an attempt to arrive at “a clearer formulation of the relationship of play to leisure” (p. 81), Giddens notes that leisure and play are sharply separated from work, which is defined as instrumental and an economic obligation; but leisure takes productive or obligatory forms, so play can be understood as a kind of leisure that is neither instrumental nor obligatory; and even then, play is not entirely outside of the “real world” and its demands. In sum, the categories of leisure and play are too loosely defined to warrant a definitive distinction, although play defines a more specific type of experience and behaviour.

Neither play nor leisure can be reduced to “the opposite of work”. Caillois (1958) notes that the definition of play-as-the-opposite-of-work reflects a capitalistic worldview in which play compensates for the alienation of factory work by reintroducing creative and fulfilling labour into everyday life. Histories of play demonstrate that the spatial, temporal, and conceptual separation of play from work stems from the advent of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution (Cross 2008). As for leisure, canonical definitions avoid the simplistic opposition of leisure with work, which fails to capture the complexity of individual situations. Instead, they contrast leisure with obligations, a category that includes formal work but also domestic chores, care work, and social duties. Dumazedier (1962:26) characterizes leisure and obligations as the two halves of the “everyday life dialectics” (“*dialectique de la vie quotidienne*”). Scholars of leisure characterize it as the domain of “free time”, a time during which activities are freely chosen and not coerced (Stebbins 2007). Many activities outside of work do not (always) qualify as leisure (such as domestic chores, family care, home repairs) and leisure itself can come to strongly resemble work.

Nevertheless, work plays a central role in the definition of leisure. The experience of women who are not employed illustrates that leisure becomes problematic when it cannot be contrasted with a form of work that is formal, recognized, and clearly bounded in time and space. What is free time when, in a technical sense, all time is free (from a boss's demands)? Women who are employed but still bear the brunt of housework and childcare in the form of a "second shift" face similar difficulties. Deem (1986) argues that women's specific relationship to formal and informal work produces distinct forms of leisure, and most notably a lack of compartmentalization between work and leisure. Indeed,

women themselves may find it difficult to decide what aspects of their lives at home are leisure, which are enjoyable through work, and which are definitely work[,] and this has consequences for how and when they are able to relax. Men whose main employment is outside the home seem to have no such problems distinguishing between work, work related activities and obligations, and enjoyment and relaxation, nor do these categories often seem to overlap. (p. 82)

The boundaries of women's leisure are blurred by its tendency to blend into obligations (for example, watching television proves very compatible with ironing) and to have a productive quality (knitting or cooking can simultaneously fulfill domestic obligations and personal interests). In her overview of the literature on women's leisure, Shaw (1994) notes that it is both constrained and constraining, in the sense that leisure is less accessible to women while also reproducing gendered norms and power relations. The women I have interviewed illustrate this pattern:

But, well, yes, you can put down cleaning the house as leisure because it helps me clear my mind. You can. Not shopping for groceries, however, that really bores me. But cleaning my house at my own pace, at my own pace, yes. It clears my mind, it makes me feel better.³³

As Deem argues, women's leisure highlights that a strict differentiation of work and leisure is a theoretical artifact that does not reflect social practices.

Older adults stand at the crossroads, and arguably at the blind spot, of two phenomena: while work heavily structures the social world and individual lives, old age is symbolically and institutionally a time without work. The absence of work confines older adults to a devalued position in a cultural and social context that holds work as a core value. This also disrupts their relationship to leisure which they cannot frame as a temporary respite from work anymore. In old age, leisure is problematic precisely because it is abundant. Endless free time is intertwined with the marginal status of older adults in a work society. This heightens the stakes of seemingly negligible decisions regarding older adults' use of their free time, including whether they should

³³“Mais, euh, si, le ménage tu peux considérer comme loisir, parce que faire du ménage ça me vide la tête quand même. Tu peux mettre. Pas les courses par contre, ça ça me fait bien chier. Mais faire du ménage à ma vitesse, à ma vitesse, oui. Ça me vide la tête, ça me fait du bien.”

play video games, how much, and how. In order to show the many ways in which play and leisure become problematic in old age, the next two subsections examine the role of work in old age and the notion of old age as a time without work. They set the stage for the last subsection's argument that leisure has unexpectedly high stakes in old age, a context that unsettles the practice of video game play.

The Liberation And Challenges Of Retirement

The institutionalization of the life course has durably associated old age with the end of the working life. The welfare state organizes the life course through policies and institutions that assign different roles and norms to each life period. For instance, the state-funded services offered to parents of young children (prenatal visits, parental leave, family benefits and tax allowances, subsidized childcare) provide specific material conditions and cultural representations of child-rearing, thus shaping the individual experience of parenthood through a collective framework. Retirement similarly contributes to ascribing shared meanings and material context to the experience of aging (Petit 2012). In France, institutions such as retirement, a minimum old-age pension ("*minimum vieillesse*"), and public nursing homes frame the material conditions and representations of old age.

Older adults overall value and appreciate retirement. The political and social struggles around retirement in France and other welfare states has established retirement as a reward, a legitimate time of rest that individuals have earned with their hard work (Repetti 2015). At the end of the 20th c., with the advent of consumer culture, marketing experts have painted retirement as the "crown of life", a time to be fully invested in leisure and the self (Featherstone and Wernick 1995). In a German study, all the older adults interviewed reported that they enjoyed their retirement, which represented newfound freedom (van Dyk *et al.* 2013). The approval for retirement as a state-mandated institution spanned all social classes, except for well-off liberal professionals.

Retirement represents a time without work during which individuals can replace the obligations of work with enjoyable, freely chosen activities, but also with well-earned rest. Michel is straightforward:

I left the workforce early and I'm making the best of it. As I'm fundamentally lackadaisical [laughing] I've been making the best of it for a while now. See, 57, 72, it's going to be fifteen years [of retirement] this summer. See, that's wonderful!³⁴

Michel fought his employer in court to benefit from the early retirement age available for parents of four or more children. His retirement does not mark the end of his working life, however. Since he retired, he has been involved in a time-consuming part-time job at an

³⁴"Je suis parti plus tôt et j'en profite. Étant un dilettante par nature [rires]. J'en profite depuis longtemps. Voyez, 57, 72, ça va faire 15 ans cet été. Hein, c'est magnifique !"

association that offers legal counsel and support to teachers. It is not so much the absence of work, then, than the freedom to work on his own terms that retirement symbolizes. Sylvie anxiously waits for retirement even though she knows that her pension will be extremely small. Once retired, she will be able to stop looking for short-term jobs, which are few and far between for a sixty-year-old without any degree who suffered several physical injuries when she was a factory worker and a gardener. Retirement represents several forms of freedom for Sylvie: freedom from work, but also freedom from the stress and administrative surveillance that come with her unemployment check.

While older adults' sentiment towards retirement is predominantly positive, older adults have nuanced and varied outlooks on the institution. Some describe the end of their working life as a shock that unsettled their habits and the structure of their life. Alain explains:

Well, I did go through something of a complicated time because retiring is not at all easy. [...] because you see it as some sort of completion, because of course you're exhausted, by work and by all the obligations, etc. So you see it as an endpoint and you don't realize that you're so marked by everything you've lived through, that the shock is brutal.³⁵

Older adults are aware of the debates concerning their social and economic position as pensioners. The end of the working life marginalizes older adults, especially in a neoliberal context that delegitimizes the institution of retirement and challenges its very premises (Repetti 2015). When interviewees talk about retirement as a time of rest and freedom, they often adopt a defensive tone or follow up with a joke about their "laziness". In that regard, older adults' attitudes towards retirement vary as a result of the significantly different meanings given to retirement in different social classes (Craciun and Flick 2014). While the conceptualization of retirement as a time of deserved rest is common among working-class individuals, retirement represents an opportunity for self-actualization and "giving back to society" for middle- and upper-class individuals (Caradec 2001b). Barthe, Clément, and Druhle (1990) give an overview of the many ways in which class shapes retirement: blue-collar workers get into handiwork, family care, and make themselves available to their children, while white-collar workers get involved in volunteering and associations and maintain an extensive social network.

The connection between old age and the end of the working life proves challenging for older adults. Through the loss of one's identity as a worker and/or a productive member of society, aging threatens individuals' status as adults and citizens (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Caradec 2009). It prompts thorough changes and redefines their social roles, identity, sociability and interactions, and material conditions through a series of trials (Caradec 2012). Cultural representations of old age compound the marginalization of older adults and make the identity

³⁵“Bon en même temps c'est vrai que j'ai traversé une période un peu compliquée, parce que le passage à la retraite c'est pas du tout évident. [...] parce qu'on le voit comme un aboutissement, parce qu'évidemment on est épuisé, par une vie professionnelle et par toutes les contraintes, etc. Donc on voit ça comme un point d'arrivée et on se rend pas compte on est tellement imprégné de tout ce qu'on vit, que le choc est brutal.”

of “old person” even less desirable. In works of fiction, the qualifier “old” conjures up images of frail bodies and feeble minds, grumpiness and pettiness, inter-generational conflict, and inexorable death (Sauveur 2011). Blaikie (2004:81) notes that

those not engaged in paid work, primarily children and the retired, have been relegated to a condition of dependency [...] Not only are [the retired] marginalised through non-membership of the workforce, but also their exclusion is legally enforced through [...] statutory retirement ages and pensions at the other. (2004, p. 81).

A consequence of the marginalization of aging individuals is the widespread refusal to identify as old. The latter is a recurring pattern and methodological challenge in the research on aging as, in Katz’s (2015) words, it is difficult to do fieldwork on aging when “nobody is old”.

The constitution of old age as a time without work in a work society has extensive implications for older adults (Kohli 1988). As work is a “cultural organizer” that defines which actions are acceptable and desirable, the absence of work constitutes old age as an anomaly and a problem. This poses a problem for aging individuals but also for society as a whole: indeed, “how does a society uphold its guiding moral orientation in the face of a group which by structural reasons is excluded from it, or more precisely, from the activities and rewards that give it substance?” (p. 381). Representations of retirement in the media and political discourses reinforce the notion that retirees and pensioners are problematic citizens who threaten the economic viability of society. Media that covers population aging primarily frame the topic in catastrophist terms, describing older adults as a burden and a threat to society as a whole (Martin, Williams, and O’Neill 2009). Older adults represent a “demographic time bomb” because of their lack of economic contribution and the cost of social security and health care structures (Fealy *et al.* 2012). According to this perspective, older adults should find ways to contribute to society, for instance through informal work such as childcare, or at least work on themselves in order not to put a strain on the social security net.

A Protracted Exit From Work

While old age is culturally associated with retirement, in practice, individuals do not suddenly and entirely stop working when they reach their sixtieth birthday. Although retirement remains critical in shaping the experience of old age, both culturally and materially, older adults perform different types of formal and informal work. Firstly, because of the complexity and frequent reforms of the French pension system, a small but growing proportion of older adults are still formally employed. In 2018, 5% of people between 65 and 74 years old were still in employment (INSEE 2018). And even though the age of sixty remains the symbolical threshold to old age because of its historical role as the legal retirement age, successive reforms have pushed retirement back for many, with an average retirement age of 62 in 2019 (according to 2019 INSEE data). Secondly, old age and retirement are two heavily interwoven experiences, but two distinct experiences, nonetheless. Retirement is only accessible to individuals who have

participated in the labour market and a significant proportion of older adults do not meet these criteria. It is especially the case for women who were stay-at-home spouses and parents, thus falling within the purview of either the pension system or social welfare but not the retirement system. Thirdly, and most importantly, many older adults continue to work in one way or another, from unpaid labour to undeclared employment. This includes domestic labour, care work for young or sick relatives, and volunteer work.

Interviewees' situations illustrate the many forms of work in old age. Most interviewees either have left or are progressively leaving the workforce. Only one is employed full-time and is not planning to stop anytime soon. This does not mean however that the fifteen other interviewees are retired: one is unemployed and in the process of applying for retirement, one is set to retire in less than a year and has consequently slowed down her professional involvement, one is technically not retired and lives out of her savings and part-time work, and two combine part-time work and welfare benefits. Involvement in the formal labour market exists on a spectrum, as Isabelle's experience illustrates. Isabelle used to work in finance but decided to pivot towards a nearly full-time volunteer activity three years ago. She occupies a prestigious but unpaid public office, works as an independent financial consultant, and teaches part-time at the local university. Although she has put an end to her career, her schedule continues to be just as busy, if not more:

I was going to say, it's almost more demanding than paid employment because vacations dates are imposed [...] I cannot go on holiday, or just a little during school holidays, when the tribunal is closed. So it did change my life rhythm, yes.³⁶

Isabelle has however gained one half-day of free time per week: "So that's the moment when I have something that is a bit less, a little less connected to, um, all the activities that are about, I was going to say work."³⁷ The interplay between work and non-work continues to rhythm Isabelle's schedule.

Unpaid work and the informal labour market are a common experience in old age. Seven interviewees are involved in associative or volunteering activities that are formally similar to — and sometimes strongly resemble — paid work. Isabelle is essentially an unpaid judge. Michel volunteers as a legal counsel and mediator for teachers in an association that fulfills the role of an insurance company for civil servants. Chantal assists migrant persons with their administrative records, judicial hearings, and French lessons when she is not manning the register at the local co-op. Alain experiences a strong continuity between his work as an IT teacher for disenfranchised groups and his volunteering work as an IT teacher for rural elders. Several interviewees are also involved in care work and domestic work for others, an intense

³⁶ "J'allais dire c'est presque plus exigeant qu'une activité salariée parce que les vacances sont imposées [...] je ne peux plus partir en vacances, ou très peu aux vacances scolaires, aux vacances du tribunal. Donc ça a changé le rythme de vie, oui."

³⁷ "Donc c'est le moment où j'ai quelque chose qui est un peu moins, un peu moins lié à, euh, toutes les activités un peu plus de, j'allais dire de travail."

and unpaid form of work that shares many characteristics with volunteering. While caring for her disabled husband for several years and taking in her sister with Alzheimer's three afternoons each week, Marie took care of her husband's doctor's granddaughter every Wednesday for seven years, "for free, of course!"³⁸

Play, Leisure, And Retirement: A Perfect Match?

While work does not entirely disappear from older adults' lives, retirement still reconfigures individuals' relationships with leisure and play. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops and during interviews, for older adults as well as for the people around them, it is common sense that old age implies the absence of work and therefore an increase in leisure and play. Martine explains: "I'm retired, I do whatever whenever I want, however I want, at the exact moment I want. I never put pressure on myself."³⁹ In a workshop, when a volunteer announces that there will be no workshop next week because of the holidays, a participant interjects with a smile: "Well we're always on vacation!"⁴⁰ In contrast, older adults describe play and leisure as an afterthought when they reminisce about middle age and working life. When formal work and/or housework are at their most intense, usually when interviewees are in their 30s and 40s, play is secondary and only starts to take up more room as work slows down. Chantal notes that she started playing video games "perhaps a little before retiring, you see. I'd say four years, four to five years. Because before that I really didn't have the time to get into it."⁴¹

In old age, retirement restructures the boundaries and relationship between work and leisure. As formal employment remains marginal in old age, older adults' continued economic contribution often consists in associative work, volunteering, and collective activities that teeter on the line between work and leisure. They constitute the "leisure formally analogous to work" that Ekerdt (1986) describes as an essential resource for the moral management of retirement as a time without work. Indeed, "How can our value system defend this situation — retirement — when it is elsewhere engaged in conferring honour on people who work and work hard? The answer lies in an ethic that endorses leisure that is analogous to work" (p. 241). This "busy ethic" and strategic use of leisure allow older adults to demonstrate their continued adherence to values of productivity and social involvement through what was once the polar opposite of work in their life.

While this attitude favours specific types of activities, particularly those that are deemed economically productive or profitable for the community, the "busy ethic" is at its core about the performance of busyness. Whatever its content, leisure that is formally analogous to work provides a welcome sense of continuity with the working life. Older adults can recreate the

³⁸"Gratuitement, bien sûr !"

³⁹"Je suis à la retraite, je fais les choses quand j'ai envie, comme j'ai envie, au moment où j'ai envie. Je me mets jamais la pression."

⁴⁰"Nous on est tout le temps en vacances !"

⁴¹ "Peut-être un petit peu avant la retraite, tu vois. Je dirais quatre ans, quatre à cinq ans. Parce qu'avant j'avais pas trop le loisir de m'intéresser à ça."

alternation between leisure and work by separating proper leisure from busy leisure, the latter being characterized by a sense of obligation, constraint (whether in terms of time or engagement), and energy expanse.

Just as working adults cycle between time at work and time off, retirees too can have ‘time off.’ [...] For example, if the morning was spent running errands or caring for grandchildren, one can feel comfortable with napping or a stretch of TV viewing in the afternoon.” (Ekerdt 1986:241).

Older adults divide their time between productive time and personal time to reconcile the discourse of “active aging” with a celebration of retirement as well-earned rest (Breheny and Stephens 2017). For instance, Martine is heavily invested in a variety of leisure activities, including learning Korean, horse-riding, watching foreign films, and playing video games. Some of these activities fall in the category of work-like leisure, especially language learning, about which she disconsolately says: “I’m not working every day at the moment.”⁴²

Work-like leisure occupies an important place in older adults’ relationship to their uncertain social role in a work society. Such forms of leisure are not specific to old age: individuals of all ages get involved in “serious leisure”, a type of leisure that has work-like characteristics, including the conduct of a proper career, the investment of significant effort, the production of an outcome, an ethos of personal involvement, and a tendency to identify with one’s pursuit (Stebbins 2007). The notion of “serious leisure” introduces an important element about the role of pleasure in leisure. Serious leisure is above all tied to notions of obligation and responsibility to others. As such, it goes beyond an understanding of leisure as first and foremost the pursuit of enjoyment. Overall, it is fruitful to decentre the study of leisure, and indeed the study of play, from matters of pleasure or fun. Otherwise, the analysis risks missing all that is at stake in leisure in terms of roles, norms, sociability, and meanings. Social sciences perspectives have been careful to account for the complexity of leisure, from Stebbins’ (1982) aforementioned “serious leisure” to Rojek’s (1986) figurational approach that focuses on power relations and refutes the association of leisure with freedom. Yvette and Michel provide examples of this type of leisure that resembles work, is often embedded in obligations towards others, and does not prioritize pleasure. Yvette, who was already retired at that time, has cared for several older family members, including her mother. She would visit her mother twice a week and try to entertain her with outings and other leisure activities. While the time they spent together fits the definition of leisure, Yvette describes the visits as a form of (care) work, mentioning the sense of duty and the tiring commutes back and forth. For his part, Michel illustrates the ambivalent status of gardening, an activity that constitutes an enjoyable hobby for some interviewees and a chore for others. He describes gardening, not as a duty or social obligation, but as an external constraint imposed by his wife for the proper maintenance of their home and lifestyle.

⁴²“Je travaille pas quotidiennement en ce moment !”

Where do video games stand in this renewed division between leisure and work(-like leisure)? Interviewees have different perspectives on the matter. Some, like Sylvie and Martine, are involved in a gaming career that structures their everyday life and carries some obligations. It is particularly visible in the case of Sylvie, whose role as a guild master in *World of Warcraft* entails the coordination of a middle-sized group of players (such as arbitrating when there are disputes about the distribution of the loot earned by the group after fighting a monster), the coordination of the guild's activity (setting up a calendar to establish when and for how long guild members meet up for dungeons or raids), and the supervision of the guild's social spaces (including the Discord server and voice chat). Sylvie finds in *World of Warcraft* a social role, a set of temporal or interpersonal constraints, and a sense of recognition and authority, reminiscent of other interviewees' description of their involvement in associations or what Stebbins calls serious leisure. That said, most interviewees do not however engage with video games in such an involved and structured manner, and video games constitute a respite from work rather than a form of work-like leisure. Isabelle plays short games of the management game *Cooking Fever* on her smartphone to take a break from examining cases in the context of her intensive volunteering job, and Nicole does the same with the puzzle game *Homescapes* whenever there is a lull in the flow of housework. For them, video games are firmly situated in the category of leisure, in contrast with other work-like leisure and obligations.

Golden-Age Games workshops are more amenable to an understanding of video games as work-like leisure. Organizers place an expectation of assiduity and commitment on participants. Workshops are explicitly designed to offer participants a gaming career, with a progression and an end, and identity resources for participants who may want to reinvent themselves as gamers. They revolve around learning specific skills with quantifiable markers of progress and efficiency. They can be an exhausting and physically demanding activity that participants have to prepare for and rest from. Participants relate to the *Golden-Age Games* workshops in a variety of ways, including some that evoke leisure-as-work. At the very least, the process of learning how to play is often characterized as work: "That's really [this gesture] you should work on", "That gets my arms working". Video game play thus finds its way into the life without work of older adults as alternatively a work-like activity or proper time off, reflecting the ambivalent and occasionally challenging experience of leisure in old age.

1.3. Dangerous Games

Video games turn out to be a particularly challenging form of play, and even more so for older adults. Video games carry specific representations that add another layer of complexity to older adults' efforts to become players. The legacy of moral panics in the 1990s has fused with a widely shared anxiety about digital technology (whose most recent expression is a concern regarding screen time and its effects), forming a cluster of fears that proves difficult to navigate for older players.

“Little Hoodlums Who Live In A Virtual World”⁴³: Video Games and Media Panics

The 1990s saw the rise of heated debates about addiction and violence in video games (Mauco and Bogost 2008). The intensification of anxieties about video games in the 1990s happened in France, but it is not specific to this context. It is a broad and transnational phenomenon, connected to a global economic shift in the production and distribution of video games in the aftermath of the 1980s (console) video game crisis. For instance, Karlsen's (2015) chapter on moral panics about video games draws on examples from the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Brazil.

The discourse on video games that dominated mainstream media and the political arena in the 1990s has all the hallmarks of a moral panic. The concept, most notably developed in the work of Cohen (1973) and Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994), is limited by its reliance on the researcher's assessment of what a “reasonable” reaction to a new media or practice would look like. But it provides an analytical framework that makes sense of the discrepancy between the strong mobilization against video games and the relative lack of evidence regarding their harmfulness (Karlsen 2015). Anxieties about video games feature the commonplace elements of moral panics, including an emphasis on children's exposure to dangerous media and the focus on media as a threat to society. The concept of moral panic highlights that what is at stake in such controversies is the definition of the proper social order, its norms, and its boundaries (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). This explains the pattern of conservative politicians and dominant social groups stigmatizing practices associated with youth, immigrants, and/or the working class. This aspect of the phenomenon is particularly well captured in Drotner's (1999) study of a subset of moral panics associated with new forms of media and modernity: media panics. They feature characteristics such as a focus on the media itself (which can act as a proxy to debate other issues, such as crime levels or education), a strongly normative approach (with media being either good or bad), a discussion between adults about youth, moral entrepreneurs whose moral views often align with their professional interests, and a three-part temporal

⁴³In reference to a quip by then-Ministre of the Interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement who, at the height of the moral panic surrounding video games and other media, castigated “*ces petits sauvages qui vivent dans le virtuel*” during a press conference in 1998.

structure with a beginning involving spectacular news items, followed by an intense debate, and a fading-out phrase. The concept of media panic facilitates comparison with similar phenomena, such as anxieties about serialized novels in 1830s France (Queffelec 1986) or telephones in the 1880s in the United States (Marvin 1990).

The controversies about video games in 1990s France belong to a long line of similar media panics. This contextualizes the reactions of the older video game players I have interviewed. They have lived through the controversies of the 1990s as adults and often parents, that is, as moral entrepreneurs' intended audience. This warrants a short history of the period, and I draw here on the work of Mauco (2008) and Lalu (2016) on moral panics about video games in France. In my research, I do not directly address arguments about violence and addiction in video games: there is no scientific consensus on the matter, and in any case, it is outside of the scope of sociological research (for an overview of the discussion in psychology, *cf.* Ferguson and Kilburn 2010). The discursive tension about video games in the 1990s lends itself to an analysis inspired by Becker's (1966) sociology of deviance, particularly on rule creators and moral entrepreneurs.

The qualification of video games as a problem began in the early 1990s, and the coverage of the release of *Mortal Kombat* by national TV news in 1993 constituted a turning point. The topic of violence in video games and/or because of video games became a recurring theme in discussions of digital play. This laid the groundwork for other groups to seize the subject, particularly in the political arena in the late 1990s. Conservative politicians, who at the time were in minority in the Parliament, attempted to bring to the forefront issues of crime and moral and social decline as evidence of the left-wing party's failure to govern the country. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the topic of video games became a staple of parliamentary life, particularly through the opposition's questions to the government. The vote of a law "on the protection of minors" in 1998 kickstarted debates about the dangers of video games, further fuelled by the coverage of the Columbine high school shooting in 1999 and journalists' emphasis on the hypothetical role of video games in the tragedy. Members of the opposition and the government alike described video games as a cause of youth violence. The former used the argument to decry governmental weakness while the latter praised the government's concern for the country's youth.

Interest in the topic died down after the 2002 elections and change in the parliamentary majority, but other stakeholders picked up this political resource. The most influential actors in this category were a Catholic association and, to a lesser extent, a police union. The latter strongly reacted to the release of *Grand Theft Auto* on console in 1998. The union called for the prohibition of the game because it simulated violence against police. Their request went unanswered but the "GTA scandal" was the object of much media and political discussion. In the same period, the Catholic, family-values-oriented association "French Families" ("*Familles de France*") problematized video games as a dangerous object that fostered immoral and violent behaviour, drove a wedge between generations, and degraded children and teenagers. Their mobilization lasted well into the 2010s through reports, calls for action, and collaboration with

conservative politicians. It most notably campaigned for the “zoning” of certain games (keeping the products in spaces inaccessible to minors, a model inspired by sex shops).

Journalists played a major role in framing the terms of the debate about the dangers of video games. As they looked for experts to interview on video games, the editorial teams of most television channels and newspapers turned to psychologists. As medical professionals, they were expected to provide an objective and scientific perspective on the matter. This recruitment strategy oriented the media discourse towards pathological forms of play and a medicalized assessment of video games. Incidentally, in the 2000s, the focus on violence partially morphed into a focus on addiction. It heavily weighted on the media coverage of the success of Massive Multiplayer Online Games such as *World of Warcraft*. Debates about the dangers of video games have also structured academic game studies, whose scholars have also taken part in the normative struggle.

But the late 2000s also mark the beginning of a backlash against the moral panics of the 1990s. Alternative discourses on video games emerged and made progress into the political arena and the media. The specialized video game press took a stance in defence of games, and its journalists produced a discourse on the legitimacy of video games and players. The video game industry itself had become more organized since the late 1990s, with the Union for Ludic Software Editors (“*Syndicat des Editeurs de Logiciels Ludiques*” or SELL) launched in 1995 and the Association for Multimedia Works Producers (“*Association des Producteurs d’Oeuvres Multimédia*” or APOM) in 2001. Their members carried out relatively successful attempts to counter anxieties and political attacks against video games, most notably by establishing a self-regulatory content rating system similar to PEGI.

Enduring Fears: Violence And Vulgarity In Video Games

Despite this shift, the moral panics of the 1990s and early 2000s have durably shaped representations of video games. The terms of the discussion about video games have changed, especially into the media coverage and the political arena, but the association of video games with issues of violence and addiction is lasting:

[field notes from a regional competition] Organizers and participants are having a picnic outside before the beginning of the competition. The president of one of *Golden-Age Games*’ main source of funding is chatting with a board member and several coordinators. The board member, a woman in her fifties, says: “Twenty years ago, people said only addicts were interested in playing video games.” One of the (thirty-something) organizers laughs, so the board member adds: “It was, really! You’re too young to remember.”

Video game players are (still) in the middle of an ongoing struggle between various moral entrepreneurs and halfway through a process of cultural legitimization. Older players face

persistent fears and criticisms relayed by their older relatives, spouses, friends and colleagues, other players, and themselves, as well as media stories, fictional representations, and political discourses. The actors involved in older adults' digital play are in a similarly uncomfortable situation. *Golden-Age Games* organizers sometimes struggle to reconcile their wariness towards video games with the promotion of these games in nursing homes. Local coordinators find themselves encouraging older adults to play video games while discouraging young people (including volunteers) from doing the same thing. A supervisor explains that she does everything in her power to convince nursing home residents to play the Wii, but she has no video games in her house because she does not want her (pre-teen) daughters to play. Although organizers spend great amounts of energy and time convincing older adults to play video games, they oversee projects that encourage middle- and high-school students to decrease their screen time and involvement in digital practices. As a result, volunteers have to navigate contradictory messages about the effects of video games:

[field notes from a local competition] In the back of the reception hall where the competition takes place, volunteers have set up six panels. It is a small exhibition about digital technology. One panel presents pictures of the workshops, all featuring participants playing and laughing with volunteers, and no text. But the other five panels have lengthy texts with information about the dangers of digital activities (including video games), warning about the potential physiological and psychological damage, and providing guidelines for the supervision of children's leisure.

Older adults are expected to be enthusiastic yet cautious video game players and digital technology users:

[field notes from a conversation with a partner of the association] The second representative for the leisure organization that partners with *Golden-Age Games* is very enthusiastic about the project. She defends "the well-known benefits of video games" and mentions improvement in cognitive health, balance, and focus. [...] The second representative insists: "I wouldn't want super-online seniors". She proudly shares that her mother recently learned how to use a computer and now teaches other older adults, and then criticizes her mother for spending too much time on the computer. The representation then says that the last time her teenage daughter went to spend time at her mother's home, she was shocked to see her mother be on the computer instead of spending time with her granddaughter. And it was not even because her granddaughter was on her phone and ignoring her grandma, the representative explains: her (teenage) girl was reading a book! "Everything is backward".

Older players have similar doubts about their practice. The 1990s moral panic is a widely shared reference among interviewees. In the 1990s, those we consider to be old today were in their thirties or forties, and several of them were parents of children and teenagers. They recount their uncertain reaction to their children's play, framing themselves as parents who were a little worried but understanding, especially in contrast with other parents. Sylvie recalls:

Yes, my husband was against it. He was quite strict, really. Um, for him, it was bullshit. But I thought about the fact that all of [my children's] friends played video games. So, um, it could isolate them somewhat, um, socially, from other children their age. I said, it's not worth it, you got to move with the times.⁴⁴

Alain thinks back to his son's teenage years: "Ah yes, he also did what we call LAN parties. [...] Several times. It was crazy. They don't sleep for two days. It's a whole thing. Well, at least they're there, they're not messing around somewhere. That's what I tell myself as a father [laughs] to stop worrying."⁴⁵

The figure of the young players and the preoccupation with their potential victimization is a recurring topic in interviews. When they offer a general commentary on video games and their players, interviewees systematically focus on children and teenagers, usually with concern. Marie thinks of the parents:

And I think it must be terrible to raise children today, with video games. [...] I think if I had to raise children and I was younger, I would set limits, in the sense that I would say 'You play from that hour to this hour and that's it', I would forbid things because I believe it must be very difficult to, to keep an eye on things.⁴⁶

This preoccupation with youth is characteristic of moral and media panics. It reflects a collective struggle to make sense of modernity and change (Drotner 1999), as well as anxieties about the disruptive potential of new media, particularly about what it might do to society and its hierarchies (Marvin 1990).

Interviewees carry over patterns inherited from the 1990s controversies about video games. Violence is a prevalent topic, often coupled with anxiety about children's development and a medical/psychological perspective. Martine, who is by far the interviewee most involved in the defence and celebration of video games, reverts to a very critical perspective when it comes to children playing video games such as the popular shooter/sandbox game *Fortnite*:

Because when you allow them to play *Fortnite* when they are between twelve and fourteen, it destroys them completely. For instance, I have a friend who's a psychologist, and among her patients she has several children addicted to video games who became

⁴⁴"Oui, mon mari était contre. Il est quand même assez rigide. Euh, pour lui c'était de la connerie. Mais moi j'ai quand même réfléchi au fait que tous leurs copains y jouaient. Donc, euh, ça pouvait les couper un petit peu, euh, socialement, des autres jeunes de leur âge. J'ai dit, c'est pas la peine, faut vivre avec son temps."

⁴⁵"Ah oui, lui il a fait d'ailleurs ce qu'on appelle des LAN Party. [...] Plusieurs fois. C'est la folie. Ils dorment pas pendant deux jours. C'est une ambiance. Bon au moins ils sont là, ils font pas de bêtises ailleurs. C'est ce que je me dis en tant que père [rires] pour me rassurer."

⁴⁶"Et je trouve qu'éduquer des enfants maintenant avec les jeux ça doit être terrible. [...] Je pense que si je devais élever des enfants et si j'étais plus jeune, je mettrais des barrières, c'est-à-dire que je dirais 'Tu joues de telle heure à telle heure et pas plus', j'interdirais des choses parce que je trouve que ça doit être très difficile de, de surveiller."

completely violent with their parents, really damaged kids, because of *Fortnite*. [...] In fact, as a rule, I'm not okay with war games.⁴⁷

However, violence is not the only preoccupation that older players express regarding video games. 1990s moral panics, despite their lasting influence, are distant. Over the past decades, alternative discourses on video games have systematically countered arguments based on the hypodermic syringe model of media effects, which suggests that violent video games cause violent behaviour in players by exposing them to violent imagery. Proponents of video games have quite successfully shifted the focus from the (supposed) negative effects to the (supposed) positive effects of video games (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). How come, then, that outdated moral panics still make their way into players' assessment of video games? In fact, they are echoed by another set of anxieties: the fears about digital technology and screen time.

Renewed Anxieties: Isolation And Addiction In Digital Media

Preoccupations with new media is a cyclical phenomenon. Contemporary narratives focus on "screens", a broad category that lumps together old and new technology such as television, tablets, and smartphones, and the risks that come with screen time and these devices' prolonged use. These narratives have the same characteristics as earlier media panics, including the emphasis on screens' dangers for children's development, the deterioration of social connection, and a medical and psychological language.

When interviewees discuss the dangers of video games, they often weave it into a broader critique of digital technology and media as the boundaries between video games and other "screens" are porous. Many of the preoccupations expressed by players correspond to fears about the disintegration of social relations and norms. It is a common thread linking together a variety of concerns: violence, addiction, social isolation, scams, and even bad spelling. The latter may seem inconsequential, but it symbolizes the fear of a literal inability to communicate, as Alain's reaction shows: "It's reached incredible proportions, even on quasi-institutional websites. It's really shocking to me."⁴⁸ Many interviewees make the connection between "screens" (whether associated with video games or not) and social isolation: they use strong words and talk about "an individualist society" or "a social cut-off", suggesting that "we are in a communication society and we don't really communicate anymore"⁴⁹. Interviewees illustrate their argument with stories of failed interactions around digital devices. Sylvie recounts:

⁴⁷"Parce que quand on leur permet de jouer à *Fortnite* quand ils ont entre douze et quatorze ans, ça les *destroy* complètement. j'en veux pour preuve, j'ai une amie qui est psy, qui a dans sa clientèle plusieurs enfants addict aux jeux vidéo qui sont devenus complètement violents avec leurs parents, vraiment détériorés les gosses, à cause de *Fortnite*. [...] D'ailleurs en général avec les jeux de guerre moi je suis pas d'accord."

⁴⁸"Ça atteint des proportions, même sur des sites quasi institutionnels. Ça me choque vraiment."

⁴⁹"une société individualiste", "une coupure sociale", "On est dans une société de communication et on communique plus vraiment."

with a childminder friend, we were dining out. We were talking, and suddenly she takes her smartphone, and she starts to do something on it, looking at it. I go ‘Hey, I’m here, hello’ [laughing]. No, it’s something, I find it really sad, this. You’re spending time with people and suddenly they stop existing because, oh wow, here’s my smartphone, wow. And, and one of my sons, the eldest, he’s just like that.⁵⁰

New anxieties about digital media amplify earlier moral panics’ focus on addiction (Syvertsen and Enli 2019). The notion of addiction is used to make sense of players’ investment in and enjoyment of video games; it refers to a great variety of behaviours, far beyond the conventional medical and psychological uses of the term. *Golden-Age Games* organizers regularly broach the topic of addiction to video games. In one of the local branches, the coordinator strongly encourages volunteers to play board games instead of video games during breaks with the explicit goal of minimizing time spent in front of a screen. Organizers who are themselves video game players are worried about becoming addicts, like this local coordinator who says that he has “an addiction to video games” but “is working on it”.

Organizers react in ambivalent ways to older participants’ play. Organizers proudly and often facetiously tell journalists, researchers, and each other that participants are “addicted” to video games. A representative of a partnering organization uses that vocabulary in her inaugural address at a local tournament: “some are quite addicted to games”, “If you’ll allow it, I’d say they’re geeks⁵¹”. A local coordinator who comments on her local teams’ success in the regional competition approvingly describes participants as “addicts”. The implication can be slightly dismissive, especially when organizers refer to addiction in response to participants “acting out” (expressing emotions such as frustration or disappointment during games) or being “demanding” (particularly when they complain about their limited access to the console). The reference to addiction becomes a joke, based on the incongruity of strong emotions and passions or genuine interest in video games in old age. However, in other contexts, organizers take the matter seriously and discourage certain forms of play among participants, particularly solitary play. They fear that participants might become too interested in video games and stop socializing as a result. They usually encourage participants to play together, even with games that are designed for one player and devices that are designed for one user (such as word jumbles or memory games on tablets).

Interviewees are preoccupied with getting addicted to video games, whether they play several hours a day or once in a while. All sixteen interviewees mention the topic. Their unanimity is striking given that the interview guide was careful to exclude any reference to addiction. Interviewees usually broach the topic to convince me that they are not addicted to video games. In their accounts, addiction is problematic because it leads people to ignore interactional norms,

⁵⁰“Avec une copine assistante maternelle, on était au restau. On était en train de parler, et d’un seul coup elle prend son smartphone et elle se met à machiner, à le regarder. Je dis, ‘Oh oh, je suis là, coucou’ [rires]. Ah non, c’est un truc, je trouve ça vraiment triste, quoi. On est avec les gens et d’un seul coup ils n’existent plus parce que, mon Dieu, il y a mon smartphone, oh la la, mon Dieu. Et, et j’ai un de mes fils, le plus grand, il est comme ça.”

⁵¹“Certains sont assez accros au jeu”, “je me permets de dire qu’ils sont des geeks”.

thus threatening social relations, and because it demonstrates a regrettable lack of self-control (*cf.* Chapter 6.1). In sum, video games' reputation as a dangerous object, fuelled by moral panics and technological determinism, position them as a particularly problematic form of play.

1.4. A Precarious Cultural Object

In addition to the legacy of moral panics about violence and addiction, older adults who play video games have to contend with their low status in the hierarchy of cultural practices and leisure. Although the involvement of moral entrepreneurs in the defence and promotion of video games has slowly been reconfiguring their status, video games remain both a dangerous object and a lowbrow practice in the eyes of many, including players themselves. This structures the integration of video games into the everyday life of older adults, who for the most part place little value on their play.

Video Games On The Margins Of Culture

In the previous section, the analysis has focused on video games as a technology and media. This section proposes a complementary angle informed by the sociology of cultural practices and leisure studies. It situates video games in the larger context of everyday life and examines how video games fit within hierarchies of leisure. Video games remain a relatively devalued cultural practice. Indeed, institutions and individuals involved in the production and diffusion of video games occupy a marginal position in the cultural field. Moral entrepreneurs involved in rehabilitating video games have argued that video games are cultural and artistic works, an argument that has gained traction over the past two decades. Debates about whether video games are art are a staple in the discourses about video games and particularly in game studies (Simon 2017). Yet it has been only partially successful, and “digital games still hover on the borderline as legitimate cultural objects” (Whitson et al. 2021: n.p.).

Video games are a mass media associated with popular culture and the entertainment industry. As a principle of structural homology continues to shape the hierarchy of cultural practices, their value derives in part from the social composition of their audience and the position of their producers in the cultural field (Bourdieu 1979; Duval and Coulangeon 2014). There remains a historical association between video games and the working class dating back to arcades and their predecessor, the pinball machine (Huhtamo 2005; Blanchet and Montagnon 2020). Although there are similar proportions of players in all socio-professional classes today, play practices are differentiated across classes. Mainstream representations of video games coincide with play practices associated with working-class players (such as console games, First-Person Shooters, racing games, sports games) (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). These elements converge to define video games as a lowbrow practice, less valued and less legitimate (in a sociological sense) than other leisure and cultural practices.

In this context, it is no small feat that:

[as] a form of cultural activity long considered in France to be part of ‘popular culture’, and as such ignored by France’s intellectual and governing elites [...] Videogames and videogaming have recently become increasingly ‘respectable’ (but still controversial) in

the heavily hierarchized and essentially enduringly elitist world of French culture” (Dauncey 2012:187).

The legitimization of video games fits into the project of “cultural democracy” (“*démocratie culturelle*”) that was the Ministry of Culture’s policy at the time. As a result, promoters of the cultural and artistic value of video games found decisive allies among state officials and political personnel. They obtained significant symbolic achievements, such as the Knighthood of the Order of Arts and Literature being awarded to game designer Michel Ancel (creator of *Rayman*) in 2006, as well as institutional achievements, most notably the inclusion of an Observatory of Video Games in the prestigious National Centre for Cinema. Still, their project remains incomplete, partly because segments of the art world refuse to share resources (prestige, but also state subsidies or fiscal exemptions) with what is still perceived as a popular form of entertainment and mass cultural industry (Coville 2013). Skepticism regarding the artistic nature of video games also comes from outside of the art world. Coville retraces the contentious history of the Video Game Tax Credit to illustrate the struggles concerning the cultural status of video games. Among other hindrances, the French government had to amend the (at the time) 20% tax credit project following a warning from EU commissions. EU representatives viewed the tax credit as an attempt to abuse the cultural exception principle and give an unfair economic advantage to French game companies. The final (and current) version of the Tax Credit thus includes an evaluation grid that ascertains the degree of cultural/artistic value of the video game project. Criteria include having a narrative (which brings 3 points to the game), a music composer (only 1 point), or being inspired by an existing cultural or artistic work (2 points, but up to 4 points if said work is famous and European), alongside technical and financial elements.

Video game players themselves rarely draw on arguments about the cultural or artistic value of games. Both in the *Golden-Age Games* workshops and in interviews, players and the people who promote their play tend to draw on games’ hypothetical positive effects rather than their aesthetic value. The exception to this pattern is Martine, a heavily invested player who identifies as a gamer and weaves together a justification of her practice with a celebration of games. She is the only interviewee to discuss the aesthetic value of video games. While playing *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* on her Switch, Martine often draws attention to the games’ visuals and lauds the craftsmanship of the creators: “Do you realize how beautiful the visuals are? How imaginative they are, these guys, it’s unbelievable.”⁵²

“Shitty Little Games”

The modest cultural value attributed to video games affects older adults’ perspective on their play. In their accounts, video games come through as a lesser alternative to other, temporarily inaccessible but more valued activities. Except for a small subset of respondents who are heavily invested in their play, older players position video games quite low in their hierarchy

⁵²“Tu te rends compte du graphisme ? L’imagination qu’ils ont, ces mecs, c’est invraisemblable.”

of leisure activities, although they occasionally prioritize digital play over other activities that are less satisfying or less accessible.

An important methodological *caveat* is needed here: it is not because respondents state that video games are a lesser and last-resort activity that it is actually the case. These accounts must be contextualized as an effort on interviewees' part to make sense of their play to themselves and the interviewer. Dismissive comments on video games are typical of the early part of the interview, when interviewees are unsure about the researcher's perspective on video games. Through such comments, players acknowledge the low cultural status of their activity and pre-emptively deflect criticism. They share this strategy with other groups of video game players, particularly casual players (Thornham 2011).

Older players tend to frame video game play as less desirable and less valuable than other activities. When interviewees hierarchize leisure activities, which many do spontaneously, video games compare negatively with almost everything other activity. Interviewees lump together playing video games with activities such as watching soap operas or reading romance. They share a similar hierarchy of cultural practices, with reading at the top, movies and television somewhere in the middle, and video games at the bottom. Christophe, for instance, explains: "Ah well I prefer reading to playing video games. A game, you're trapped by, I'd say the guy who designed it, the software, but with the book you create your own story. Contrary to a movie where you also are subjected to the story."⁵³ Overall interviewees hold it as self-evident that reading is a respectable and desirable cultural practice: "So reading, yes, it is necessary that [...] children, we must get people to love reading."⁵⁴ On the opposite end of the spectrum, video games are at best silly and at worst dumb. Interviewees describe games, including the games they play, as "stupid", "shitty little games", "bullshit"⁵⁵. Chantal stops short of granting any intellectual or cultural value to her quiz game, keeping her distance with discourses about video games as cognitive training: "it's usually very corny. [...] It's really not, um, of a high cultural level."⁵⁶

Older players occasionally challenge the notion that video games have little or no cultural value. A common strategy is the description of video games as the successor of long-established cultural practices and art forms such as literature or art-house movies. It is mostly the case for games with strong storytelling and roleplay elements such as *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Sylvie makes a connection between her love of reading and her interest in the online adventure game *World of Warcraft*:

⁵³"Ah bah moi je préfère lire à un jeu. Un jeu, vous êtes prisonnier du, je dirais du gars qui vous l'a conçu, du logiciel, mais le bouquin vous créez votre histoire vous-même. Contrairement à un film où vous subissez aussi l'histoire."

⁵⁴"Alors la lecture, oui, il faut que [...] les enfants, il faut faire aimer la lecture aux gens".

⁵⁵"débile", "des petits jeux à la con", "des conneries".

⁵⁶"La plupart du temps c'est cucul la praline. [...] C'est quand même pas un grand niveau, euh, culturel."

I really liked it because it was a world. Um. Since I'm the kind of person who reads a lot, you, you must be thinking that of course I'm the kind of person who likes to daydream, to escape from reality a little bit.⁵⁷

Likewise, Martine describes her play as a continuation of her childhood passion for science fiction literature. Nevertheless, the two interviewees who grant a higher degree of cultural value to video games are also the most involved players. Video games remain overall associated with lowbrow culture and youth subcultures, a connection that further complicates older adults' ability to engage with digital play.

Low-Priority Leisure

Video games are a secondary form of leisure in the sense that most interviewees position them as an alternative to other, more valued but less accessible activities. Several participants lump video games together with other activities that count as low-energy leisure, that is, what they do when they are too tired to engage in their preferred hobbies. Nathalie has two sets of leisure activities during her lunch breaks: if she has energy, she calls relatives; if she is really tired, she either watches soap operas or plays games on her phone, something she describes as "doing stupid stuff". Sylvie concurs:

But when you're playing a video game [...] it's so addictive, so easy, when you are physically tired. When you are physically tired, you tend to sit in front of the computer and forget about your fatigue. While when you try to do something else, well, it's different, you feel the fatigue. [...] So, and that's something that bothers me quite a lot because I would like to do something other. Than play.⁵⁸

Video games also constitute an alternative to activities that are not readily available, as for Christophe:

When you always have a smartphone in your pocket, and then, well, you're standing somewhere, you're waiting, you've got nothing to do, rather than, I'd say, hang about and gaze at the ceiling, you play a little game to relax and all. [...] When, when, when I've got nothing to do, where. And, I'd say, it's more practical than having a book handy.⁵⁹

⁵⁷“J'ai bien accroché parce que c'était un univers, euh. Euh. Étant donné que je suis quelqu'un qui lit, vous, vous devez vous dire que forcément je suis quelqu'un qui aime bien rêver, et m'échapper un peu de la réalité.”

⁵⁸“Mais quand on est sur un jeu vidéo [...] c'est tellement addictif, tellement facile, quand on est fatiguée physiquement. Quand on est fatiguée physiquement, on a tendance à s'asseoir devant l'ordinateur et à oublier sa fatigue. Alors que pour faire autre chose, euh, c'est différent, la fatigue on la sent. [...] Voilà, et ça c'est un truc qui m'embête beaucoup, parce que je voudrais faire autre chose. Que jouer à.”

⁵⁹“Quand on a un smartphone facilement dans la poche, et puis, bah, on est dans un coin, on attend, on a rien à faire, plutôt que de, je dirais, glander le nez en l'air, on fait un petit jeu pour se distraire et tout. [...] Des, des, des moments où j'ai rien à faire, où. Et, je dirais, ce côté plus pratique que d'avoir un bouquin sous la main.”

It is notable that, in the case of the interviewees who regard video games as a valued activity rather than an alternative, there are other leisure activities that play that secondary role. Sylvie explains that “I’ve tried to watch a little bit of Netflix, so I’ll watch it sometimes, usually when I’m tired, when I can’t play, when I’m exhausted or sick.”⁶⁰

Although the perspective of *Golden-Age Games* participants is less straightforwardly accessible than interviewees’, they appear to share the same mindset and consider digital play as a secondary leisure activity. Overall, organizers find it difficult to recruit and retain participants. When organizers encourage residents who sit or walk by the workshop to participate, it is often in vain. Unannounced non-attendance is frequent even among regular participants. When residents refuse to play or cancel their participation in a *Golden-Age Games* workshop because they have other plans, they signal that other forms of leisure have priority over the workshop:

[field notes from a workshop] Volunteers start setting up. There are residents sitting in the common area, but they are watching television or dozing off. The leisure supervisor leaves the room to go find participants. She comes back with two residents who head for the Wii, but she explains that several of the residents she wanted to bring to the workshop are not available. One is having mid-afternoon snacks, another one is reading a newspaper and asked to be left alone, and one is having a nap.

The frequency with which participants drop the workshop for other activities suggests that video games rank lower in terms of commitment and priority. It is particularly salient in the case of competitions. Organizers sometimes have trouble recruiting enough players to set up teams, and several organizers mention scrambling to replace participants who cancelled at the last minute. In one case, volunteers have to find replacements for half the teams as they dropped out a few weeks before the competition. In another city, volunteers had to ask residents who had never played the Wii to complete the teams.

“Keep That For The Stadium!”: When Older Adults Play In Public

When video games are pitted against other potential leisure activities, their status as a secondary activity becomes visible. In the institutions that host *Golden-Age Games*, video games are one activity among others, and it is rarely the most popular or attractive one. Several organizers tell me that they struggled to retain their participants whenever other plans were made at the same time as the workshops (such as a card tournament or an outing):

[field notes from a workshop] The coordinator escorts me into the workshop. I ask her question about *Golden-Age Games* and how she set up the workshops. [...] The coordinator explains that she didn’t want to only have workshops in *EHPADs*, because she also wanted more autonomous participants. So, the workshops take place in one

⁶⁰“J’ai essayé de me mettre un petit peu à Netflix, donc je regarde de temps en temps, plutôt quand je suis fatiguée, que j’arrive pas à jouer, que je suis crevée ou que je suis malade.”

EHPAD and one *résidence-autonomie*. But volunteers find *EHPAD* easier, in fact, because they have a “captive audience”. In *résidences-autonomie*, people go out, and activities compete with each other. There are almost too many activities, and a lot of funding. The *résidence-autonomie* audience is harder to retain than *EHPADs*’.

The host institution staff make sure to fit the workshops into the institution’s schedule during time slots with no or few other activities. It is in their interest to spread out activities in order to maximize overall attendance. In one institution, for instance, the leisure coordinator set up the *Golden-Age Games* workshop during “hairdresser day”, a day normally devoid of leisure activities, to make it as accessible as possible. In some institutions, leisure supervisors have decided to move the *Golden-Age Games* workshop to another time slot to give it a better chance at attracting residents. One workshop had a slow start because it fell on the same afternoon as the residents’ collective trip to go grocery shopping. It started picking up speed when leisure organizers agreed to reschedule the shopping trip.

In institutions where *Golden-Age Games* workshops are in direct competition with other activities, it is the video game workshop that suffers from the competition. Overall, video game workshops do not lure participants away from other activities but rather the other way round:

[field notes from a workshop] In the same room as the *Golden-Age Games* workshop, there is a creative workshop where participants hand-paint ceramics. It takes up most of the room: twenty residents are sitting around a long wooden table, overflowing with paintbrushes, feathers, and glitter. They chat while they paint. In a corner next to the door, three volunteers and one participant sit around a small table. The participant plays on a tablet in silence while volunteers attempt to get a conversation going. [...] The creative workshop is over. The volunteers set up the Wii console, but nothing happens. [...] A resident comes by the small table and asks the participant playing on a tablet to move because there is a group of four residents who want to play cards. The participant gets up and leaves. There is no one taking part in the *Golden-Age Games* workshop now.

Even though some organizers assume that the novelty value of digital technology and video games will draw crowds, most leisure supervisors correctly anticipate that video game workshops are at a disadvantage compared to other, more established activities. “[The card game] *belote* wins every time”, a dejected local coordinator tells me.

The competition between video games and other activities sometimes escalates into outright conflicts. Divergent opinions about the value of video games lead to tensions about whether play is appropriate in the shared space of the institution:

[field notes from a workshop in a community centre] A weaving workshop is taking place in the same room as the video game workshop. The very large room is roughly divided in half, with a dozen older women weaving at a table and three older women playing *Wii Bowling* on the opposite side of the room. [...] The players are a little rowdy,

talking a little loudly, clapping when someone lands a strike, laughing and encouraging each other. [...] There is an interruption: one of the women weaving at the nearby table comes over to the players and tells them to quiet down. She is visibly irritated and her tone is aggressive. She tells participants: “Keep that [behaviour] for the stadium!” The centre director, who was watching the participants play, calmly tells her that they were aware that there would be a noisy activity in the same room when they booked the room. The weaver marches back to her table. Players were apologetic, and now they speak in hushed voices.

The dispute highlights the uncertain legitimacy of the video game workshop in leisure spaces. The appropriateness of video games was explicitly and quite violently called into question, and none of the players stood up to this challenge. Despite the centre supervisor’s support, players apologized and made sure to take up even less space than before. While this conflict was uncharacteristically overt, there were several similar instances observed during the fieldwork. The literature on video games in nursing homes provides additional examples. Neufeldt (2009:2) says of an experimental Wii workshop in German nursing homes:

We were confronted with an unexpected situation when about half of the participants had tried out the wii. The volunteer group leader started talking to some elderly trying to convince them that playing wii is wrong and that elderly should not do this. When she noticed that most of the elderly were happy with playing wii and lost their concerns she tried to sabotage the round by starting an alternative program with singing and gymnastics which made it more difficult for us to get the attention of the elderly. Most of the elderly joined the alternative program as long as it was not their turn on the wii. It turned out after the round that the volunteer had concerns about her fitness round. Although we talked to her before presenting the wii and cleared out that we did plan an additional program not affecting her offer she was convinced by the fact that we [did not try] to substitute her by a video game.

This account highlights the various factors that weigh on the implementation of video games workshops for older adults in institutions: the dismissal of video games as an inappropriate activity for older adults, the low status of video games in the hierarchy of leisure activities, the competition between leisure program and their leaders within the institution, and the strategies adopted by older adults to navigate confusing and sometimes contradictory expectations. Video game workshops are a prime site of negotiation and tension over the role of leisure in old age.

Putting The “Video” In Video Games

To understand how digital play fits in the leisure experiences of older adults, it is critical to interrogate how older players themselves make sense of the category. The definition of video games is blurry and porous, and it is also far from unified across social contexts. It is a common issue for social sciences concepts that go back and forth between everyday language and

scientific analysis (Schaffer 2015). Different groups may identify the same activity as playing video games or not. For instance, doing crosswords online may count as “doing crosswords”, “playing a game”, or “playing a video game”. This also applies to games that are not digital versions of classical games; playing a point-and-click mystery game may count as “doing something on the computer” but not “playing a video game”. Players draw on such “gamey family resemblances” to group them with other leisure activities such as card games or sports (Simon 2017:2). I examine the conceptualization of video games in older players’ accounts, questioning whether video games constitute a distinct category or are rather seen as a variation on other familiar leisure activities.

The variation of a concept’s definition across social contexts has methodological and analytical implications. I examine what video games, as an object and practice, mean to their users in order to avoid imposing my own understanding of the concept onto respondents’ experiences. Otherwise, I would be unintentionally excluding players whose practices I have not anticipated from my research (for instance by using restrictive language in recruitment and research materials). The *Ludespace* study’s presentation broaches this issue, which is commonplace in quantitative surveys on video game players. *Ludespace* researchers have hypothesized that asking individuals whether they play video games comes with a high risk of under-declaration. They indeed obtained significantly higher results when the usual question (“Have you played video games over the past year?”) was rewritten to exclude the phrase “video games” and include examples of specific games (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021)⁶¹. Occasional players and individuals who have been heavily exposed to moral panics about the dangers of video games are particularly prone to describe games on digital devices as something other than video games, and both of these categories are significantly represented among older players. This is not to say that they should identify what they do as video games, but rather note that there is no consensus about what “video games” are, not only among academics but also among players themselves.

Following Simon, I adopt a social constructionist perspective that momentarily sets aside formal definitions of play and games, focusing instead on social actors’ own perception of the research object:

A game is whatever the various folks talking about what it is happen to be able to convince, coerce, and cajole each other into agreeing with (or at least not disagreeing with). Thus, a game is not defined by goals, rules, or the meaning of the myriad formal properties that we scholars have given them, but rather by the collective agreement of players as to the goals, rules, or meaning of a specific shared activity that they tend to refer to as “playing a game.” It follows from this that if we want to know what a game is then we have to make sense of what players say and do since it is only their activity that constitutes the thing that we want to study[.] (Simon 2017:3)

⁶¹I adopted a similar strategy in the phrasing of my recruitment posters and interview guide.

In the context of my fieldwork, older adults regard video game play as a distinct activity with specific characteristics, although its boundaries with neighbouring categories such as “(non-digital) games” and “doing stuff on the computer/phone” are sometimes blurred. This is particularly the case during *Golden-Age Games* workshops. They are ostensibly dedicated to video games but host a variety of games and activities related to digital devices. Only 6 out of the 30 workshops I observed were exclusively dedicated to *Wii Bowling*. In participants’ experience, console play coexists with other video games (especially on tablets), but also with an array of non-digital playful activities such as card games, board games, and sports. 8 workshops also included activities related to digital technology that were not presented as games. Some are initiated by volunteers who browse the Internet with participants or demonstrate specific features of various digital devices, including karaoke machines. Participants may also come to the workshop with their own digital devices to ask volunteers for advice or troubleshooting. Finally, other activities that are seemingly related neither to play nor to digital technology also take place in the workshops, including drawing, singing, and cooking. The *Golden-Age Games* workshops themselves are occasionally diverted from their initial purpose (for instance when volunteers find themselves doing nail art or coming with residents on a trip to the library) or generate other activities (for instance creative workshops to make banners and T-shirts for future competitions). Video games thus blend into the leisure environment of the host institution.

Still, video games make sense as a category to the players encountered in the *Golden-Age Games* workshops and during interviews. Players use the phrase “video games” in workshops, even though organizers often prefer circumlocutions and euphemisms that erase the digital aspect of the activity (“the bowling game”). Interviewees also talk about video games even though the recruitment posters intentionally avoided the use of the phrase and instead mentioned “games on computers, phones, tablets, or consoles”. It appears that, to older players, the category of “video games” is defined and characterized by the notion of “virtuality”. Interviewees comment at length on the relationship between the everyday world and the virtual worlds that they inhabit when they play. Even when video games are explicitly a continuation of another pen-and-paper activity, they insist on the differences between the two versions of the same activity by comparing and contrasting them in terms of experience, affordances, and play context.

The accounts of Philippe and Yvette illustrate this effort to distinguish video games from similar activities. Philippe is a plane enthusiast who has flown small airplanes for the past forty years, has built his own plane, and is heavily involved in his local pilot association. He started using flight simulators nearly twenty years ago when the graphics became sufficiently realistic for him. He sees flight simulators as simultaneously a game and a form of training and regards them as an extension of his passion for planes. He plays simulators with photo-realistic landscapes based on the National Geographic Institute’s data and reproduces flights that he has already done or plans to make with the simulator. But Philippe still draws a neat line between, in his words, real flying and virtual flying, and will not lump them together in the same category. Flight simulators are remarkable in their ability to mimic “the real thing”, he says, but they

remain an entirely different experience: their virtuality makes them not real, but beyond reality. “It’s somewhat magical. [...] Magical. Completely virtual, completely unreal, but, well, somewhat funny.⁶²” The virtuality of simulators also carries a specific threat, that of losing oneself: “Still you got to be careful, really, you got to be careful about virtual worlds.⁶³” Yvette shares a similar premise, although in a very different genre. Yvette greatly enjoys sudoku, which she finds stimulating and a welcome alternative to reading. She plays sudoku every day, sometimes in a large book with a pen, sometimes on her tablet, and sometimes on her computer. The situation has the potential to blur the boundaries between non-digital and digital versions of the same activity. Yet Yvette maintains a medium-based distinction and differentiates “playing sudoku” (with pen and paper) and “playing sudoku on the tablet/computer”. For her, the experience is significantly transformed by the game’s characteristics on her tablet or computer: pop-ups and ads, pages that load automatically, a single grid per page, a leader board, and scores. The criticisms addressed to video games also contribute to separating them from other games. Isabelle draws on the distinction (and hierarchy) that her husband makes in that regard:

[Does your partner have the same play habits as you?] Oh, not at all. He. I think he doesn’t find that very interesting. No, not at all. [Including traditional games?] Ah yes, traditional games, yes, but not video games. [...] Traditional games, you’re playing a game. Not with video games.⁶⁴

For older players, including very occasional players, video games are a separate activity that is not subsumed under other categories such as “games”, “play”, or “digital activities”. However, they do not systematically use the phrase “video games” to describe their activity, often using terminology like “playing on my phone” interchangeably with “playing video games”. Furthermore, older players tend to regard video game play as distinct but not fundamentally different from other forms of play or digital leisure. While some of the people who witness or supervise their play see video games as something extraordinary (in the literal meaning of the word) in the lives of older adults, older players themselves tend to de-exceptionalize video games, which are just another activity available to them in the wider context of leisure in old age.

⁶²“Ça a un côté féérique. [...] Féérique. Complètement virtuel, complètement irréel, mais euh, un côté rigolo.”

⁶³“Après il faut faire gaffe, quoi, il faut faire gaffe au monde virtuel.”

⁶⁴“[Est-ce que votre compagnon a les mêmes habitudes de jeu que vous ?] Ah non pas du tout. Lui il. Je pense qu’il ne doit pas trouver ça très intéressant. Non, pas du tout. [Y compris pour les jeux traditionnels ?] Ah si, pour les jeux traditionnels oui, mais pas pour les jeux vidéo. Les jeux traditionnels, oui, oui oui. Les jeux traditionnels, on joue à des jeux. Mais pas vidéo.”

Conclusion

Video games are challenging and to an extent problematic for their older players. The association of play with childhood and idleness disrupts adult play and exacerbates the tensions around (non-)work in old age. Moral panics of the 1990s, compounded by more recent anxieties about the effects of digital technology and “screens” on their users, frame video games as a strange and potentially dangerous hobby. While the position of video games within the field of culture is changing, their association with lowbrow culture and youth subcultures further complicates older adults’ engagement with digital play.

Despite their practice, older players remain quite wary of video games and their purported dangers. Older adults have not been exposed to video games through peer socialization in childhood or adolescence. Their first contact with video games often took place in the context of heavily publicized moral panics in the 1990s that addressed them as parents and adults. Many have carried their uncertainty regarding video games’ influence and value into old age, where it comes up against preoccupations about continued productivity and the best use of one’s time in a life without work. In reaction, older video game players deploy strategies to deflect criticism and distance their play from notions of incongruity or deviance. They tend to closely manage the visibility of their play, hiding it from the people around them or framing it as a secondary form of leisure. Expressions of enjoyment or interest in digital play alternate with dismissive or disapproving comments about digital play (including their own games or play style).

Older adults’ digital play exists in relation to cultural standards and social norms about old age, play, and leisure. They shape expectations and interpretations that in turn alter how older adults access, play, and talk about video games. Old age matters in video games; not in biological terms, but in connection with the meanings of old age and digital play in contemporary societies. The challenging status of older adults’ play does not preclude a significant proportion of older adults from playing video games at least occasionally.

That said, the discursive context around older adults’ play is shifting, establishing alternative narratives and identities for older video game players. In line with techno-enthusiastic discourses about “successful aging”, the figure of the “silver gamer” proposes a positive, although quite narrow, outlook on older adults’ play.

CHAPTER 2. PRODUCTIVE PLAY

At The Intersection Of Successful Aging And Instrumental Play

“At the forefront of such [digital] tools are video games, which some institutions do not hesitate to use in order to distract but also to stimulate the brain activity of the elderly in their care.”

*Extract from the “Living Together Longer” report
(Gimbert and Godot 2010:53, my own translation)*

On the last stretch of my journey to a workshop hosted by a small-town nursing home, I rode the bus with the local team of young volunteers. Out of curiosity, I asked them whether they knew why I was here. I had been careful to reassure the coordinator about my intentions (I was in no way going to evaluate anyone’s work; I would anonymize the data and make sure that it could not be traced back to one specific city, even for *Golden-Age Games* administrators; I was mostly here to collect impressions and anecdotes for my research on how older adults play video games) and wanted to know how the information had been passed along to them. I was a bit taken aback to hear that I was there to “show the benefits of Wii gaming for the elderly”; and, one volunteer added, it was a good thing too, more people should know about the advantages of video games for older adults.

Volunteers were echoing a narrative that has gained ground in France and elsewhere over the past decade: video games have positive side effects on cognitive and physical health, socialization, and digital literacy; therefore, digital play is a great hobby for older adults who want to age well. In this chapter, I analyze the figure of the silver gamer and its emergence at the confluence of the successful aging framework and the rehabilitation of video games. On one hand, the silver gamer is grounded in an understanding of aging as a process of decline that individuals can and should curb by working on themselves: engaging in regular physical exercise, closely monitoring their health, striving to act and look younger than they are, *etc.* On the other hand, it draws on a techno-enthusiastic attitude that ascribes many virtues to video games and promotes instrumental play as a strategy to work on oneself (and one’s cognitive performance, mental health, physical fitness, academic performance, employability, *etc.*).

I argue that the narrative of the silver gamer constitutes a discourse, that is, “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault [1969] 2002:54). It establishes a distinctive representation of older adults’ play practices and preferences with an emphasis on health and technological innovation. The discourse of the silver gamer has contributed to the emergence of a field dedicated to older players. It transforms older players’ experience by

providing them with video game-related opportunities but also by promoting certain forms of play over others.

The chapter explores the emergence of the silver gamer and examines the discourse, its actors, and its conditions of emergence. The first two sections argue for the existence of a distinct silver gamer discourse (2.1.) and describe the network of actors involved in its promotion and dissemination (2.2.). The second half of the chapter sheds light on the silver gamer discourse's connection with successful aging (2.3.) and with the rehabilitation of video games through instrumental play (2.4.).

2.1. The Rising Fortune of the Silver Gamer

Over the past decade, a new way of talking about older adults who play video games has gained prominence. In this subsection, I argue that the narrative of the silver gamer constitutes a discourse (in the Foucauldian sense of the term) that affects older adults' play in diverse and concrete ways. I substantiate that argument with references to the critical literature on older adults and video games, a discourse analysis of the media coverage of older adults and video games, and observation data from *Golden-Age Games* workshops.

The Silver Gamer Discourse

At the beginning of my research on older adults' digital play, which started during my Master's degree in 2013, I had never (knowingly) met someone over sixty who played video games. My first contact with older video game players was mediated by academic papers and media pieces whose descriptions of older players were remarkably similar. The same themes came up over and over again: video games are a form of cognitive training that can benefit older adults; they help bridge the gap between older adults and their grandchildren; getting older adults to play video games is challenging because of their cluelessness with new technology, *etc.* The critical literature on aging allowed me to identify and question this perspective's underlying assumptions about older adults, but it is when I started my first fieldwork in a video game workshop for older adults⁶⁵ and met with older players that I measured the discrepancy between older players' experience and the narrative of what I have come to call the silver gamer. The ethnographic and critical literature on older adults and video games (De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2008; De Schutter *et al.* 2014; Iversen 2016) confirmed that the older players I met were not outliers but indeed rather representative.

The gap between silver gamer stories and older players' experiences was not lost on the respondents I met during my Master's. They were uncomfortable or outright angry, particularly at journalists who wrote articles about the workshop. One of the participants (who later got into a heated argument with the cultural centre's PR manager regarding the media coverage of the workshop) reflects on the subject during an interview:

I can't remember for what media it was, a piece that was kind of about video games and health, and that aimed to show that video games were good to prevent aging. And that annoyed me a bit, really, because it meant we were really put into an age group. [...] And I felt that we were all lumped together and that we were kind of grannies who were coming here to fight Alzheimer's disease. It annoyed me enormously. It was really a therapeutic angle. If you watch us play, it's really not like that. (my own translation)

⁶⁵During my Master's, I was fortunate to be able to conduct ethnographic research in a video game workshop for older adults in a Parisian cultural centre (with no ties to *Golden-Age Games*). I attended the workshop for a year and conducted interviews with its participants, whose generosity and reflexivity started my nearly ten-year-long research journey.

The results of my doctoral research corroborate this participant's observation. When it comes to older adults' video game play, one narrative dominates news stories, policy guidelines, video game design literature, *etc.*; and its prevalence is all the more striking that it does not reflect the practices of older players. Therefore, I set to investigate the figure of the silver gamer, its origins, and its expansion, with a particular focus on whether it finds its way into older adults' video game play. For that purpose, I use the notion of discourse, particularly in reference to Foucault (1969) but also to Hacking (1995, 2004), to explore the complex relationship between what people do and what people say. The tradition of discourse analysis associated with the discipline of linguistics underwent significant changes in the 1970s. In *L'archéologie du savoir*, Foucault (1969) characterizes discourses as collections of statements whose contents, speakers, and boundaries vary throughout time and space. As such, discourses are elusive, but they can be studied through the traces that they leave, the statements captured in texts of all sorts, and the genealogy of their emergence and transformation. Foucault ([1969] 2002:54) defines discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" and thus leave their mark on the social body. The study of discourses examines the formation and interconnection of certain recurring statements within a discursive space through a set of rules and actors. It examines what is said, or rather what can be said, about a specific topic: how come that specific statement emerged and no other in its stead?

Discussions about older adults and video games satisfy these criteria: they feature a set of statements that their speakers frame as the truth on older adults who play video games. The figure of the silver gamer appears in mainstream and specialized media, within organizations and industries that focus on old age and leisure, among staff who works in aged care institutions, and in academic and scientific research. It somewhat departs from dominant representations of older adults as deficient technology users. This image draws on the lower equipment rate of the 60+ age group to assert that older adults are both uncomfortable and incompetent with new technology (Caradec 2001a). The silver gamer perspective does refer to similar premises but updates it with other understandings of aging and technology. This yields the following narrative: older people are incompetent with new technology but they should be nudged towards it because technology is an optimal strategy to age well. It frames video games as a worthwhile endeavour for older adults because of games' purported benefits, especially in terms of cognitive and physical health. It celebrates older adults who play while encouraging those who do not to take up video games. In sum, the silver gamer discourse combines tech enthusiasm, successful aging, instrumental play, and a medicalized understanding of old age. It is important not to overstate the reach and visibility of this discourse on silver gamers. For instance, in *Golden-Age Games* events, most organizers share its assumptions but players themselves rarely refer to it. Moreover, on the whole, most actors in the field of aged care or the field of video games hardly care about older adults' digital play. But for those who do pay attention to older video game players, the silver discourse is a reference.

In summary, there exists a set of statements on older adults and video games that promote a very specific understanding of this subject. It has extensively circulated within certain circles

over the past decade(s), becoming the main frame of reference for such practices. It is productive in the sense that it has tangible repercussions in the social world, for instance in terms of access to material resources and the control of certain populations. Specific representations of older adults and video games create opportunities and remove others through the implementation of state policies, the emergence of dedicated industries and companies, shifts in the training of care and health professionals, and support provided to individuals who promote video games for older adults. In order to substantiate the argument that there is such a thing as the silver gamer discourse, I set out to detect traces of this narrative in three different contexts: academic and scientific research, mainstream media, and the *Golden-Age Games* project.

The Silver Gamer In The Scientific Literature

The silver gamer discourse is both present in the academic field, particularly in the medical realm, and studied by scholars, particularly those in the social sciences and critical studies of aging. Iversen's (2016) study of the academic literature on older adults and video games is a central reference for my analysis. Iversen considers this literature from a Foucauldian perspective, examining it as a locus of power which produces a particular subjectivity that resonates with dominant discourses on aging. The category of "old" or "elderly" is a social and political construct that, in contemporary biopolitics, problematizes old age as a lack of productivity and aged care as an economic burden for society. The research on older adults and video games, particularly in medical sciences, gerontology, and game design, ascertains a series of truths on what good old age is and how individuals can attain it. The literature explores two main avenues of inquiry: the contribution of video games to successful aging, and the importance of convincing older adults to play video games. The first topic covers the purported benefits of video games for players' health as well as their potential in reducing the costs of aged care. Aging is defined as a process of "increasingly ailing body, decaying cognitive abilities, social isolation due to immobility or societal structures, too much empty time with no meaningful activities to fill it, and lack of motivation to exercise and maintain one's health", and portrayed as an individual and social problem (Iversen 2016:13). The second topic is more strategic in tone and focuses on how to, rather than why, getting older adults to play video games. Iversen challenges the instrumental orientation of this perspective, which she contextualizes as a product of dominant images of aging. The literature positions older adults as either seniors preoccupied with their health and motivated to evade "truly old age" through consumption and self-work, or frail elderly whose costly and demanding care can partially be automated. In both cases, video games are useful insofar as they can train, heal, socialize, and distract older adults. Iversen demonstrates that the research on video games and older adults draws on a disciplinary and normative perspective of old age. In that sense, it sets the groundwork for my analysis of the silver gamer discourse and its implications for older adults' experience of video games.

De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's "Gerontoludic Manifesto" (2015) describes a similar phenomenon. The Manifesto identifies specific patterns in the scientific study of older adults and video games: an emphasis on usefulness and accessibility, an underlying assumption about older adults as a monolithic group and aging as decline, and a prevalence in academic and industry circles. The authors call scholars who work on that topic to switch to a different perspective that focuses on playfulness over usefulness, growth over decline, and heterogeneity over stereotyping. They point out the narrow understanding of older adults' play in the "current discourse on games and ageing": "In essence, the useful, pragmatic qualities, rather than the fun, hedonic aspects of games are emphasized. The hidden message is that it is acceptable for older adults to play digital games in order to achieve a higher goal of maintaining health" (p. 112). De Schutter & Vanden Abeele emphasize the role of scholars and scientists in the emergence of a certain discourse about old age and video games, but they also mention the importance of other actors, including journalists and marketing professionals. The video game industry hardly ever addresses older adults, but when it does, it is with the same rhetoric of usefulness and accessibility that pervades the research on older adults and video games.

The Silver Gamer In The Media

A discourse analysis of the media coverage of older adults and video games finds the same patterns in news stories and commentaries about older adults and video games. The "Older adults, video games and the European Francophone Press" study explores a corpus of newspaper articles that mention older adults and video games (Lavenir and Bourgeois 2017). The study uses topic modelling to identify lexical fields within a corpus of newspaper articles that mention video games and older adults. The corpus of articles was selected through Factiva, a media database with a non-exhaustive selection of national newspapers and magazines in Europe, with a second sorting by hand to exclude the least relevant results. The final corpus comprised 333 articles, all published in French-speaking printed national newspapers and magazines in France, Switzerland, and Belgium, and all including the phrases "jeu[x] vidéo" and "personne[s] âgée[s]". The study uses mixed methods and combines a natural language processing technique (topic modelling⁶⁶) with qualitative discourse analysis. It substantiates the hypothesis that a narrow understanding of old age dominates the discussion about older adults and video games.

The journalistic production on older adults and video games is a recent phenomenon. Between 2000, when the first article mentioning older adults and video games identified through the database was published, and 2014, numbers have risen steadily from 6 articles published in 2000-2002 to 97 articles published in 2012-2014. The topic modelling analysis identified three main themes: economic opportunities, health concerns, and inter-generational relationships, as well as two secondary themes: video games as arts and as a trigger for juvenile delinquency. Three (out of eight) topics cover economic themes, either identifying older adults as an

⁶⁶Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic modelling identifies "bags of words": words that come up with a similar frequency in the same articles (Blei 2001).

untapped but promising market for video games or devising strategies to efficiently design and market video games for older adults. Two topics centre on health: one topic presents the therapeutic uses of video games and the other one discusses the role of technology in health and wellness in old age. The remaining three topics are respectively about video games that foster social & inter-generational connections, video games as a cultural and artistic object, and video games as the cause of petty crimes (such as mugging or fights). Overall, the three predominant topics in the corpus are social & inter-generational connection (present in 124 articles), the therapeutic benefits of video games for older adults (present in 47 articles), and technology & health in old age (present in 51 articles).

The theme of video games' health benefits is pervasive in the media coverage of older adults and video games. Titles include "Our Seniors Age Better When They Play The Wii" (*La Dépêche du Midi* 2013) and "Serious Games: How Video Games Keep The Brain Young" (Lalo 2013), as well as the enthusiastic "The Wii, Elixir of Youth In Care Homes. Pierre, 91, 'No Longer Has Parkinson's When He Plays'" (*Le Midi Libre* 2008). References to video games' effects on physical and cognitive abilities abound. "This friendly and motivating activity keeps players active and lets them work on their balance, precision, reflection, self-confidence, perception⁶⁷" according to *La Dépêche du Midi* (2012). The staff and professionals interviewed by journalists frame video games and particularly the Wii console as a therapeutic device. They count on video games to keep dependency and dementia at bay. "[G]ames thus delay dependency and push back against decline⁶⁸", according to a medical professional (*La Dépêche du Midi* 2013). Journalists quote from residential institutions' staff, social workers, and medical professionals, who consider older adults' play primarily through the prism of health maintenance. They also draw on medical sources with sometimes daring conclusions. In *La Dépêche du Midi*, a journalist draws on an Iowa University study to argue that people over fifty years old gain at least three additional years of good cognitive health if they play at least ten hours of video games a year (2013).

Inter-generational relationships are another favourite theme. The notion of inter-generational connection refers to interactions between two age groups: older adults (over 60) and youth (under 25). The topic is prevalent in social workers' comments: "Grandpas and grannies assiduously train because they hope to crush their grandkids the next time they come to visit⁶⁹", according to an *EHPAD* director quoted in *La Charente Libre* (2010). In media pieces, older players are regularly addressed as "grandpas" and "grandmas", even when their grandchildren do not participate in their play.

In summary, news stories about older adults and video games focus on a specific type of motivation for play, namely health and social inclusion, and thus on a narrow representation of

⁶⁷"Ce moyen convivial et attractif permet de maintenir les sens en activité et travailler l'équilibre, la précision, la réflexion, la confiance en soi, la compréhension".

⁶⁸"[L]es jeux retardent ainsi l'entrée des personnes dans la dépendance et font reculer le déclin".

⁶⁹"Les papis et mamies s'entraînent activement car ils forment l'espoir de mettre la pâtée à leurs petits-enfants lors de leur prochaine visite".

video games and their players. Older adults' play is associated with certain images: a grandma playing with her grandchildren, a daily regimen of cognitive training games, an old man recapturing his youth through simulation games. The media coverage also emphasizes economic perspectives, namely, how to market video games to older adults. The two other topics, about the dangers and the cultural value of video games, pertain to the discourses about video games and illustrate a shift in the depiction of games and players. The media coverage of older adults and video games shares several characteristics with the academic treatment of the subject. Both focus on health, social connection, and economic perspectives. In media stories, the average silver gamer appears to be more invested in video games' positive side effects than play itself. Game genres and play styles that do not fit with an instrumental perspective are rarely mentioned. These include widespread and popular forms of play, including Role Playing Games, racing games, First Person Shooters, or match-3 games. As for themes, fun is conspicuously absent from this discussion of play.

Pickersgill *et al.* (2017) propose an analysis of the coverage of brain training games and their users in the UK media that supports the hypothesis of a silver gamer narrative. The sample includes 336 newspaper articles published between 2005 and 2015 on the topic of brain training games, and although there was no explicit focus on older users, old age is a prevalent theme in the sample and the analysis. On one hand, the coverage of brain training games emphasizes health maintenance, aging as decline, and instrumental play. Journalists describe these games (a prominent example of which is Nintendo's *Dr. Kawashima Brain Training*, on the DS portable console) as part of a regime of self-maintenance, particularly for aging individuals: "games were most often presented (in broadsheets and tabloids alike) as being used for enhancing citizens' brains and their selves, and to arrest or stave cognitive decline" (p. 96). Users are framed as sensible and reflexive in their engagement with digital games, which constitute a reasonable endeavour for individuals preoccupied with enhancing or at least stabilizing their abilities.

On the other hand, Pickersgill *et al.*'s (2017) close analysis identifies traces of criticism and irony in journalists' accounts. They sometimes highlight the lack of scientific evidence behind cognitive training games' claims, reflect on the injunction to self-improvement, and reintroduce notions of fun into the discussion. Nonetheless, even these nuanced approaches tend to be aligned with successful aging and the promotion of instrumental play. This is illustrated by articles that criticize cognitive training games because they are not as beneficial as they claim. They do not challenge the idea that video game play should be instrumental, but merely that they are not efficient enough at training individuals. And while some journalists argue that people should not be discouraged from playing these games because they are fun, they do not call into question the fact that certain categories of players ("mums" and "grandparents") have a narrow access to video games and have to make do with medicalized versions of fun.

The Silver Gamer In Social Work And Aged Care

The silver gamer discourse is present to various degrees in initiatives that encourage older adults to play video games. Such initiatives include philanthropic and social initiatives as well as leisure plans in aged care institutions. A case study of *Golden-Age Games*' relationship with the silver gamer discourse illustrate how it is put into practice.

The origin story of the *Golden-Age Games* project is closely connected to the rise of the silver gamer discourse. The project was launched in 2012 in response to a philanthropic call for “ideas promoting the common good” in a French region. A dozen companies, foundations, and institutions partnered during the conception and early implementation of the project. They identified three major contemporary social issues: successful aging, the digital divide, and youth integration. The project's Charter defines “successful aging”, “inter-generational connection”, and “playful digital activities”⁷⁰ as its primary objectives. A report written by the association's administrators in 2015 summarizes the rationale in those terms: in the French region where the project is located, the aging population struggles to use digital tasks, and video game workshops are an innovative way to increase digital literacy and combat social isolation among the elderly. Since its inception, the *Golden-Age Games* association has somewhat distanced itself from that language and pivoted towards a more diverse approach that values fun, competition, and empowerment. But its origins have durably shaped its orientation, and many of its long-term partners (especially in aged care institutions) are still attached to the silver gamer perspective.

The texts produced by the association constitutes a prototype of the silver gamer discourse. *Golden-Age Games* actors document their action extensively. Documentation includes partnership conventions, a website, interviews, speeches (for instance in video game conventions where the regional competitions take place), applications for funding, data (such as monitoring spreadsheets sent every month by local coordinators to their managers), *etc.* These various texts reflect the different and sometimes antagonistic positions of the many individuals and institutions involved in the workshops. Nonetheless, there are recurring patterns in this corpus that indicate the existence of a shared narrative, with an emphasis on health, successful aging, and technology's benefits and power. These texts are traces that materialize the silver gamer discourse.

The workshops are spaces permeated by the silver gamer discourse. It is present in organizers' interactions with participants, particularly in two instances: the speeches at the beginning and/or end of competitions and the presentation of the *Golden-Age Games* project to potential participants during workshops. During competitions, *Golden-Age Games* actors present their project and defend their concept:

[field notes from a local competition] Three people come on stage to deliver opening speeches. The first one is a board member of *Golden-Age Games* who recounts the

⁷⁰In French “le numérique ludique”. This turn of phrase is meant to include both video games in the broadest sense of the term and activities such as browsing *Google Maps* or taking pictures with a smartphone.

history of the project and its goals: “It’s important to stay up-to-date about what’s happening in society”, and workshops are a good way to “move, take your mind off things, and play, too”. She concludes: “The *Golden-Age Games* association wishes you a successful old age!” The second person making a speech is a senior official representing the city council. She says: “If you’re wondering how to maintain your abilities, both physical and cognitive, then play video games!” The third person is a representative of one of *Golden-Age Games*’ local operational partners. He talks about “the cause of seniors” and describes digital technology as a “tool” to age well.

Organizers occasionally make similar speeches during workshops:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The volunteers have set up the tablets and console, but there are no participants. The leisure supervisor has organized an activity that seems to function as a preparation to the *Golden-Age Games* workshops. He sits in a corner of the common room with about ten residents and asks them to help him write articles for the *EHPAD*’s newspaper. He decides to insert an article on the *Golden-Age Games* project. He writes the article on his own while residents sit in silence. He says out loud what he is typing; he is extolling the benefits of these workshops and digital technology for older adults. The final sentence sounds somewhat accusatory: “Multimedia is accessible to everyone, except those who put up walls.” Residents then quietly proceeds to the video game workshop.

The discourse produced and implemented through the *Golden-Age Games* project features several topics that are characteristic of the silver gamer discourse. The theme that dominates the texts produced by/about the workshops is, unsurprisingly, health. The authors of the 2015 report consulted a doctor and a health technology expert, who are cited throughout the report. It also features a review of the medical literature on video games and older adults, citing benefits related to physical activity, cognitive performance, but also enjoyment, psychological well-being, and social relationships. The report then examines questionnaire results in which volunteers, institution staff, and institution managers (but not participants themselves) estimate whether participants exhibit improvement in a variety of domains: physical activity, behavioural problems, autonomy, self-esteem, and so on. The report tentatively concludes that the workshops provide health benefits to participants, although it remains cautious: “Even though no direct causality has been scientifically proven, the [*Golden-Age Games*] workshops nevertheless tend to have an impact on this health parameter” (my own translation).

Health is a frequent topic of discussion in the workshops, although it is almost exclusively organizers who make the connection between health and video games. Many *Golden-Age Games* organizers refer to the purported positive effects of the workshops on participants’ physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being. A representative for one of the project’s partners describes the “well-known benefits of video games” and mentions cognitive performance, balance, and focus among them while her colleague nods in agreement. During

workshops, organizers make remarks such as “It’s better than physical therapy!”. Volunteers regularly comment that they do observe improvements in participants’ health, for instance in their ability to use their arms or get up from a chair.

The *Golden-Age Games* workshops also promote video games as a strategy for the social inclusion of older adults through inter-generational relationships. This narrative draws on a set of assumptions: older adults are lonely and want to spend time with children and young adults, who themselves do not want to spend time with older adults but can be enticed to do so with digital technology. This relies on representations that oppose tech-obsessed youth with older adults starved for affection. The objective of the workshop is twofold: bringing young volunteers into nursing homes and teaching older adults how to play with their grandchildren. The authors of the 2015 report weave together the topics of inter-generational relationships, elderly loneliness, and digital literacy, arguing that the digital divide is also a generational and a social divide.

The *Golden-Age Games* project aims to promote digital literacy among the elderly alongside social inclusion. Workshops are not merely an opportunity for participants to play and have fun: they are designed to familiarize older adults with new technology. The digitization of businesses and public agencies has created a problem for populations whose access to computers or the Internet is limited, including older adults. As a result, their mastery of digital technology has become a subject of public concern and policy, particularly with the digital switchover of public services. In line with the emergence of older adults’ digital literacy as a political discussion, the *Golden-Age Games* association frames its workshops as stimulating alternatives to old-school computer classes. It argues that video games constitute a fun and non-intimidating experience for the tech-averse elderly, particularly for the older and often disabled population who lives in nursing homes. The 2015 report exemplifies the importance of the topic of digital literacy. Although its authors are cautious regarding the workshops’ impact on participants’ digital skills, they claim that they are particularly efficient at motivating participants to learn and use digital devices. Beyond the acquisition of specific skills, *Golden-Age Games* workshops are framed as an opportunity for older adults to domesticate digital technology. Physical and cognitive health maintenance, intergenerational relationships, digital literacy: the *Golden-Age Games* project touches on all the themes of the silver gamer discourse, although many of its actors do so with caution and nuance, particularly when they have been invested in the project for a long time.

2.2. A Budding Network Of Silver Gamer Advocates

The figure of the silver gamer is embedded in a network of actors that play a critical role in its promotion and dissemination. This section outlines the different groups that endorse or echo the silver gamer discourse to some extent in France. An overview of these actors provides an insight into the formation of the silver gamer discourse, the conditions of its growth, the potential sources of tension among its actors, and the interests at stake in its expansion.

The State

Public authorities and state institutions play a structuring role in the expansion of the silver gamer discourse. The figure of the silver gamer is a reference for European Union policymakers. EU agencies have commissioned several audits and projects related to older adults and video games over the past decade. Examples include the GAMBALOA project on game-based learning for older adults, funded under the EU Lifelong Learning program in 2011, and the iStoppFalls project that aimed to create, test, and evaluate an exergame for older adults, which was funded by an organization affiliated with the EU and the WHO from 2011 to 2014 (Charlier *et al.* 2012; Marston *et al.* 2016).

The French political and policy context is conducive to a discourse that encourages older adults to play video games in order to age better. Frameworks such as successful aging and the promotion of digital literacy are official policy priorities, particularly for the Ministry of Health and Solidarity. Consequently, policymakers have created structures and funding opportunities into which the silver gamer discourse easily fits. Its language and premises are compatible with the expectations of officials who oversee coordination, support, and resource allocation for projects over the national territory. The silver gamer discourse thus seamlessly circulates in the spaces administered by the State. The notion that video games contribute to healthy aging is present but discreet in French governmental plans and policy. The 2010 “Living Together Longer” report advocates for video games in old age and argues that they help maintain one’s health, combat social isolation, and promote inter-generational relationships. But it is in decentralized state agencies that are in charge of social services and welfare policies that the figure of the silver gamer finds the most resonance. Initiatives that draw on the silver gamer discourse can usually count on the support of senior officials such as delegates from public housing agencies and welfare centres managers. They also benefit from the approval of local elected officials such as deputy mayors or members of the departmental councils.

In the observation fieldwork and the media corpus of the Lavenir and Bourgeois study (2017), three types of institutional actors stand out as particularly present in the promotion of video games for older adults. All three are local public service institutions that focus on the social welfare of the elderly: *CCAS* (“Communal Centres for Social Action”), *CLIC* (“Local Centres For Information and Coordination”), and residential institutions (such as *EHPAD* and *résidences-autonomie*). *CCAS* are public agencies that oversee the distribution of social welfare

on the territory of a municipality. Their prerogatives include the management of publicly funded care homes and home care services for the elderly. *CLIC* are local information centres dedicated to older adults and their caretakers. *CLIC* provide a directory of local medical professionals and social workers, inform citizens on available social rights and benefits, and help older adults in applying for retirement and other services. Residential institutions mostly include institutions reserved for older adults, such as *EHPAD*, for adults over sixty with a degree of dependency that calls for a medicalized environment, and *résidences-autonomie*, open to older adults who are mostly autonomous and do not require daily medical care. The frequent collaboration of *Golden-Age Games* workshops with local CCAS and *CLIC* illustrates that they have convergent objectives and compatible perspectives on old age.

The Voluntary Sector

Private initiatives that pursue a charitable or social objective are influential actors in the silver gamer discourse. Their members are among its most vocal and invested proponents. The associative sector includes actors who are specifically committed to the silver gamer discourse and assign distinct benefits to video games. Their role is central to the existence and expansion of a silver gamer discourse. Besides the *Golden-Age Games* association, several private initiatives encourage older adults' play. Examples include the Gaïté Lyrique's *Game Older* workshops in which a dozen older adults gather every week to play a variety of console games in the Parisian cultural centre's video game room, the Lorient city library that set up workshops centred on the indie adventure game *Journey*, or the equipment of several dozens of *EHPADs* with Wii consoles by the foundation associated with the Korian company, which runs for-profit *EHPADs*. Alongside these initiatives are projects that promote digital literacy for older adults and that, despite not being dedicated to video games specifically, include them among other digital technology. For instance, the *E-seniors* association includes digital *Scrabble* and bridge games in its ITC courses for older adults. Another category includes all the projects that have been homegrown in residential institutions such as *EHPAD*: a team of medical professionals that supervise exergaming workshops, a leisure supervisor who sets up a *Mario Kart* game once in a while, etc. These various projects are almost entirely unaware of each other's work. This stems from their inscription in different territories and ecosystems. As a result, although there are several associative projects on video games for older adults, each is relatively isolated.

The Media

The silver gamer discourse features heavily in the media coverage of older adults who play video games, in large part because it provides engaging and non-controversial storytelling elements for journalists. During my observations in *Golden-Age Games* events, I saw journalists at almost every competition, including local competitions:

[field notes from a local competition] There are: a team of two journalists for regional TV news, one from a local radio, and a team of two people making a documentary about the local branch of the civic service provider. In addition, many of the organizers and representatives attending are taking photos and videos. At several points, they all gather in front of the stage and stand there, blocking the view for spectators (who are sitting down). This creates a “wall” of standing people physically separating the older adults who play from their friends, relatives, and other workshop regulars who were not selected to play. [...]

At 3:10, in the middle of the competition, [a *Golden-Age Games* administrator] comes up to where I’m sitting (high up in the bleachers) with the radio journalist and asks me to give her an interview. I hesitate, but I feel like I can’t refuse. The journalist asks me who I am and why I am here, what I think about *Golden-Age Games*, whether “senior gamers” are becoming trendier, what needs *Golden-Age Games* answers. I try to remain factual and a bit evasive when it comes to my opinion. I take the opportunity to ask her why she’s reporting on this event: she says that “it’s funny” [the French word, “rigolo”, may be interpreted as “funny” or “bizarre”] and that the audience will probably enjoy it since “everyone has grandparents” and they’ll get a kick of picturing their own grandma playing video games.

Media pieces often play up the exceptionalism — and the incongruity — of older gamers. Quandt *et al.* (2009:27-28) begin their study on middle-aged and older video game players with a commentary on mainstream media’s narratives, which often features “obvious astonishment”: “The articles focus the strange, the different, the exotic—although the quoted statistics do not imply scattered deviationists, but a social mass phenomenon”. The media coverage of *Golden-Age Games* events has similar characteristics: “She’s 92, Marguerite. And, with all due respect to those who believe that at that age leisure is all about leafing through piles of photo albums, she’s getting into video game consoles with other residents of the [local nursing home]⁷¹” (*L’Est Républicain* 2009). Journalists produce texts that, for the most part, align with the silver gamer discourse and contribute to its dissemination. The situation is a win-win for initiatives that encourage older adults’ play: journalists have a heartwarming news story to tell while organizers benefit from the exposure and renewed interest in their work.

The Video Game Industry

At first glance, the silver gamer discourse has everything to appeal to actors in the video game field. The theme of the under-exploited grey market is commonplace in stories and studies about aging. Sawchuk (1995) notes that the emergence of positive images of aging, mostly in the form of successful aging, has accompanied marketing professionals’ realization that older adults are an under-solicited consumer group. A specific subset of older adults has caught their attention:

⁷¹“Elle a 92 ans Marguerite. Et n'en déplaît à celles et ceux qui pensent qu'à cet âge-là les loisirs se résument à regarder des piles d'albums photos, elle, elle s'essaie à la console de jeux vidéo en compagnie des autres pensionnaires de la Résidence du parc.”

upper-middle-class retirees who have more time and money to spend than the average consumer. In order to address the “grey market”, companies sell products that are specifically designed (or at least marketed) with seniors in mind, from cruises to technological devices and medication. These strategies are couched in a language that draws on the rhetoric of successful aging, proposing renewed and more positive images of aging in order to promote a variety of consumer goods. Sawchuk (1995:179) highlights that this discursive shift is performative and corresponds to economic interests rather than ethical preoccupations:

It is within this context that marketers now berate the myths we have about aging—myths that they have helped to create because of their past media strategies. Advertisers now state with extreme self-righteous indignation that the media previously depicted seniors as ‘sexless, senile, crotchety, frail and unhappy’.

In the academic literature on older adults and video games, two approaches coexist: one focuses on video games as a medical technology of care for the frail elderly, and the other examines “the attractive market made up of ageing adults who attain individuality and agency through consumption” (Iversen 2016:17). In this perspective, older adults’ digital play is a win-win situation in the sense that older adults age better thanks to video games while industry actors exploit a new (and potentially lucrative) consumer group.

Moreover, older adults who play video games contribute to the rehabilitation of video games. As Gerber (2015) observes, players pick up arguments from positive narratives about video games to justify their practice and thus participate in a collective effort to make video games more acceptable. Older adults occasionally turn into spokespeople for video games. Interviewees generally hold the position that they do not care enough about video games to try and convince others to play. Yet several recount moments when they advocated for video games in the face of others’ incomprehension or disapproval. Martine says, “Well I’m not proselytizing!⁷²” and Marie jokes that “I’m not paid to promote [the game she plays], you know!⁷³”, but they do have arguments ready to convince naysayers. Martine extols the benefits of games: “What they don’t realize is the benefits there are to play.⁷⁴” Nicole works another angle: “if I met someone who had a need that wasn’t fulfilled, I’d say to them “Try playing video games”.⁷⁵” Martine lets her young neighbour come over to play *Zelda* and tries to convince his parents that it is an innocuous pastime. She also intends to give her old consoles and games to a friend: “I’m going to give them to her, I want her to play. [...] And I had, I have convinced her to play, and really play.⁷⁶”

Older adults’ defence of video games is particularly powerful because they depart from the stereotypical image of the reckless and excessive gamer. The representations that associate old

⁷²“Je fais pas de prosélytisme non plus”.

⁷³“Moi je suis pas payée pour développer [tel jeu], vous voyez !”

⁷⁴“Ce qu’ils ne savent pas, c’est les avantages qu’on a à jouer.”

⁷⁵“Si je rencontrais quelqu’un qui avait un besoin qui n’était pas comblé, je lui dirais ‘Essaie de jouer’.”

⁷⁶“Je vais lui donner, je voudrais qu’elle joue. [...] Et je lui ai, je l’ai convaincue de jouer, et de jouer vraiment.”

age with frailty, wisdom, desire for social contact, and caution frame them as harmless gamers: if older adults enjoy something, then it cannot possibly be something dangerous, isolating, or vulgar. Therefore, older gamers constitute an endearing counter-model to the teenage boy engulfed in his digital toys. They focus the conversation on the potential benefits or at least the lack of danger in video games. This resonates with the video game industry's efforts to legitimize its products by insisting that the average video game player is in their late thirties (Meunier 2017). This argument aims to prove that unruly and excessive forms of play have become marginal.

Despite their potential as an “untapped market” or as an additional argument in the rehabilitation of video games, older adults are rarely addressed by the video game industry. They occasionally appear in the promotional material of video games geared towards family play. One of the better-known examples is the marketing strategy for the Wii console and its flagship games like *Wii Sports* in the second half of the 2000s. Commercials for the Wii console and games showed young children, parents, and grandparents playing together, with an emphasis on quality family time, inter-generational relationships, and collaborative, good-natured fun (Chambers 2012). Nintendo also targeted older players in the promotion of *Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain?* (2006). But outside of these family-centred advertisement campaigns, industry-produced representations of players rarely feature older adults. When they do appear, older adults are assigned to a narrow niche. De Schutter & Vanden Abeele (2015:113) note:

We are unaware of any marketing efforts in which older adults are portrayed as people who are playing without health-oriented ulterior motives, and – excluding casual “granny” games that are seemingly designed for parody (Iversen 2015) – the majority of games that specifically deal with later life are about age-related losses.

They conclude that “games rarely feature non-stereotypical portrayals of aging characters, nor are they marketed directly towards aging players.” (p. 116). Contrarily to other marginalized audiences, such as women or people with disabilities, there is no debate about whether the industry does, or should, take older players into account. As Pearce (2009) and her interviewees note, the industry remains focused on teenagers and young adults who fit the profile of the stereotypical gamer.

The Silver Economy

Companies that distribute video games for older adults exist at the periphery of the video game industry, but also at the intersection of other fields, most notably the health tech and gerontechnology industries. Games for older adults often toe the line between entertainment software and medical technology. Most of these games are designed and marketed as cognitive maintenance software. A small but growing number of companies specialize in the production of serious games for health maintenance, and older adults are one of, if not their main, target

audiences. Examples include CogniFit, a US-based company specializing in cognitive training software that has published apps such as *Cognitive Brain Fitness* and received a “Business and Aging Award” from the American Society of Aging. Another example is NaturalPad, a French company that aims to “increase patient compliance to therapy with video games” and distributes the *MediMoov* game in over a hundred medical institutions (including many *EHPADs*).

The medicalization of old age shapes the commercial offer of consumer products geared towards aging individuals. The silver economy singles out older adults as a population with needs (mostly concerning health and functionality) so specific that it cannot be lumped together with other consumer groups. In France, the economic sector that targets older consumers is institutionalized into a Silver Economie (*sic.*), a program that receives the support of the state. The Ministry of Economy’s website presents Silver Economie as a strategy to “better the quality of life of older adults, guarantee their autonomy for as long as possible, or even lengthen their life expectancy” (*Bercy Infos* 2017: n.p., my own translation). A sign of the times, Silver Economie illustrates the welfare state’s disengagement in favour of private, market-based solutions; the promotion of successful aging, with an emphasis on health, autonomy, and aging-at-home; and the economic potential of old age as an untapped market (Argoud 2016). The Silver Economie initiative was launched in 2013 by the Ministry, the same year that the Broussy report (commissioned by the Delegated Ministry for the Elderly and Autonomy) called for “putting aging at the service of productive improvement, growth, and employment”. Argoud notes however that the disintegration of the network of nurses and social workers that conducted regular home visits has impeded the dissemination of new gerontechnology. In practice, Silver Economy actors struggle to find a customer base for their wares.

Despite its limited scope, the Silver Economie plays an important part in the promotion of video games to older adults. The companies that publish video games geared towards older adults are often embedded in this ecosystem. In the *Golden-Age Games* project, a gerontechnology firm is one of the most influential partners of the association and their products feature on the association’s stand in conventions. *Golden-Age Games* has also worked towards establishing a connection with associations and companies that focus on disabled video game players’ experience, including firms that produce custom peripherals to adapt playing devices. The silver gamer discourse is compatible with the Silver Economy insofar as it opens the possibility of treating video games as consumer health technology and a gerontechnological device.

The Academic Community

Academia is another important hub in the silver gamer discourse. It is in academic spaces that the promotion of video games to (or rather for) older adults has gained significant traction and exposure, as the sizable literature on the matter in psychology and other medical disciplines illustrates. Iversen’s (2016) review shows that it is an increasingly popular research topic with a few publications dating back to the 1980s and a surge starting in the late 2000s. Academia provides several strategic resources to the promoters of the silver gamer discourse. Firstly, it

serves as a basis and justification for the claims regarding the benefits, particularly the health benefits, of video games for older adults. Scientific research acts as a quantifiable and rational type of evidence that is highly appreciated by public agencies and private companies because it gives an impression of accuracy and predictability. It is also a powerful discursive device in a cultural and social context where statements made in a scientific language possess a high degree of legitimacy.

Secondly, silver gamer advocates can recruit supporters among scientists and researchers. Researchers have an interest in arguing that their object is relevant and important, a phenomenon that is illustrated by the role of game studies in the rehabilitation of video games (Meunier 2017). A new generation of scholars who studied video games and were also dedicated gamers, reminiscent of Jenkins' (2006) notion of the aca-fan, contributed to the discursive shift concerning video games. Among the reasons for the discipline's growth in the 2000s, Wolf (2006:116) cites "perhaps most important, the first generation that grew up with video games, that played them, enjoyed them, and knew them intimately, [that] is now producing scholarly work about them".

The *Golden-Age Games* association builds its presence in the academic world, setting up a scientific committee in 2019 and commissioning reports that involved researchers in 2015 and 2019. In the *Golden-Age Gamers* 2015 report, the introduction includes a plan for a medical evaluation of the workshops. Although the authors of the report are careful to note that they cannot conduct a study that would prove the benefits of the workshops for participants, they express an interest in the idea and hope to implement it in the future. A year after the start of my fieldwork in *Golden-Age Games* workshops, the board of directors set up a research group to inform the strategy of the association. *Golden-Age Games*' partnership with a local university has even led to the creation of a Ph.D. position in psychology. The board of directors were interested in my research, helped me plan a tour of the workshops⁷⁷, and contacted me on several occasions to talk about the association's projects or recent development in the research about older adults and video games.

The role of scholars in the promotion of the silver gamer discourse is a fraught topic. As a rule, scientists and researchers interact with their object of study in ways that transform it. The emergence of scientific fields is inseparable from the exercise of power, which relies on the production of knowledge to govern subjects (Foucault 1975). Although there is more to the "power-knowledge" dynamic, one of its core features is that the creation of categories facilitates the intervention of the State upon its population. Hacking (1995:382) calls these categories "human kinds":

kinds about which we would like to have systematic, general, and accurate knowledge;
classifications that could be used to formulate general truths about people;

⁷⁷The workshops take place in spaces available to the public and the association's intervention was technically not necessary. But given the lack of centralized information and advertisement concerning the workshops, the association's intermediary made the process significantly easier and more systematic.

generalizations sufficiently strong that they seem like laws about people, their actions, or their sentiments. We want laws precise enough to predict what individuals will do, or how they will respond to attempts to help them or to modify their behaviour.

The elderly is one of those “human kinds”. They have become a distinct population category with specific needs and dedicated institutions from the early Modern age on, as far as the Western world is concerned. Katz (1996) describes the parallel development of geriatrics and almshouse-like charitable institutions that started what he calls “the discipline of old age”. From the 16th c. onward, medical and institutional professionals have framed the elderly as an essentially problematic population in constant need of intervention. The disciplines of geriatrics and gerontology have produced specialists of old age whose analyses and judgments continue to play an influential role in the representations and treatment of older adults.

This phenomenon is strikingly illustrated by gerontechnological innovation. Östlund (2004:47) shows the interplay of scientific, economic, technological, and disciplinary processes in the design of gerontechnology:

these researchers must find a means of identifying and categorizing needs for which technical solutions are to be created. One of the things expected of social science researchers is that they will contribute to such categorizations. In other words, the technology already exists, and now the problem is to find appropriate corresponding categories.

Researchers and scientists are not removed and distanced observers of the discourses on old age. They contribute, directly and indirectly, to the dissemination of specific representations and practices in and about old age. In that sense, researchers participate more or less directly in the promotion of the silver gamer discourse as well as in the subjectification of older adults.

The Sociologist

Scholars play a role in the constitution of a discourse about older adults and video games, and I am no exception to that rule. In this subsection, I reflect on my position and the conditions in which the research was conducted. I address methodological issues, examining how my choices regarding data collection shaped results, and epistemological questions, interrogating how my understanding of my research object has shaped the analysis.

I begin with a description of my position within the spaces where I collected data. It establishes what kind of data I could and could not access, what informants expected of me, and how they probably altered their behaviours to fulfill my anticipations and theirs. In the workshops, observation was designed as overt and non-participant. Through the *Golden-Age Games* association, I introduced myself to coordinators by email. They explained my work to institution staff and workshop participants. I often met coordinators and volunteers in person

before heading to the workshops as well as institution staff once arriving at the workshop. There, either volunteers or institution staff explained who I was to participants. My status was revealed and explained multiple times over the course of the observation, sometimes by me and sometimes by others. These presentations were both an opportunity to ensure that participants consented to my presence and a source of information about each actor's perception of my work.

Whenever I mentioned the topic of my Ph.D. ("older adults and video games"), organizers assumed that I was here to ascertain the medical or social benefits of video games. While riding the bus with volunteers to a workshop in the suburbs, I asked them whether they knew why I was here, and they answered without hesitation that I came to "demonstrate the benefits of the Wii for the elderly." Organizers make similar assumptions and make sure that I notice moments that fit this narrative, such as participants and volunteers laughing together, or participants with disabilities enjoying a game. Several coordinators and leisure supervisors set up meetings with medical professionals alongside workshops so that I would have authoritative testimonies about video games' benefits. Organizers were also preoccupied with not giving me interesting or spectacular enough material. In that sense, my presence and the expectations that it involuntarily carried into the workshops undoubtedly transformed the experience of participants and organizers.

The actors involved in *Golden-Age Games* seemed to understand who I was: a researcher/student touring the workshop to write a Ph.D. thesis on older adults and video games. In fact, in cities where I visited several workshops and events, I became somewhat of a mascot:

[field notes from a local competition] People are coming in: workshops participants, relatives and friends, *Golden-Age Games* administrators and representatives of partner institutions. I sit in the back of the audience, in a corner, and take notes on a scrap of paper. A representative of a local institution that supports *Golden-Age Games* comes up to me; we've met before, so we say hi to each other. He laughs and says that I'm taking notes, just like last time. He leaves and one of the local volunteers (whom I've met several times in local workshops) calls out to me: "Hey, the sociologist!" He laughs and goes to take care of something on the stage.

Nevertheless, many *Golden-Age Games* actors were unsure of what "doing research" entailed, and they reacted to my visits in different ways. Participants were relatively unfazed by my presence. They rarely questioned or commented on it, particularly in institutions such as *EHPADs* and *résidences-autonomie* where unidentified visitors are a frequent occurrence. A few organizers were familiar enough with academic research that they took my (admittedly strange) behaviour during workshops in stride. But most organizers were explicitly confused about my work. Nevertheless, several volunteers, local coordinators, and leisure supervisors felt comfortable enough to confide in me, sometimes at length, during workshops.

The uncertainty about my role shaped the rapport with informants. In a few cases, organizers or staff acted towards me as if I was a volunteer, in part because of my age: I was 25 at the time,

so still young enough to be a volunteer. But overall, organizers and other staff members addressed me as a peer, although not a colleague. They positioned themselves as experts who were willing to educate me on a topic I did not master. I encouraged this mode of engagement as a way of acknowledging informants' competence on the subject but also to better understand actors' frames of interpretation.

I had to convince informants that I was not here to evaluate their performance or report their mishaps to a higher authority. To local organizers, I was first and foremost an envoy of the association and its board of directors. My presence was evocative of the internal audit conducted a few years before by the association's administrators. As a result, organizers remained cautious in their interactions with me. They asked me what I was getting out of my observations, why I was taking notes, what I was writing down. However, they were reassured by my ostensible admiration for their work and the fact that the association has no direct authority over them. This shaped the data collection insofar as organizers were keen to showcase the workshops as a success and tell me what they assumed I wanted to hear. My efforts to defuse organizers' anxiety also altered my observation strategies. I limited notetaking as much as possible during workshops and used my phone rather than a notebook whenever possible (that is, whenever my phone's faulty battery did not unexpectedly die mid-observation). This helped maintain a casual attitude, with the side effect that organizers assumed I was relaxing and texting friends instead of working.

As a researcher on older adults and video games, and given my connection with a very active actor in that field, I am an element of the network that I attempt to map out. My relationship with the project was, and still is, uneasy. On one hand, I am sympathetic to the *Golden-Age Games*' project which departs in several ways from the baseline silver gamer discourse. Among its administrators and local coordinators, I have found individuals who were committed to *Golden-Age Games*' emphasis on fun, esports, and empowerment. Moreover, in many cases, participants are enjoying themselves and interested in this rare opportunity to try out digital play. On the other hand, I still witnessed moments of tension that reflected older adults' subordinate social position, particularly in aged care institutions (*cf.* Chapter 3.3.). During *Golden-Age Games* workshops as well as in interviews, older adults signalled their discomfort with the silver gamer narrative, which I contribute to make visible with my work. As a result, it is critical to clarify and contextualize my contribution to the project's promotion and the silver gamer discourse as a whole.

First and foremost, my presence in the workshops was the result of a collaboration with the *Golden-Age Games* association. In exchange for facilitating my access to the *Golden-Age Games* events and actors, the board members asked me to contribute to their reflection about the project. I was always careful to protect the anonymity and privacy of my informants, I did not participate in any evaluation process, and I was never pressured into providing feedback about specific workshops or individuals. Nonetheless, I was involved in strategic discussions about the project's strengths and weaknesses and wrote a report on my "workshop tour" that combined a literature review on older adults and video games with a descriptive overview of

Golden-Age Games events. It earned me a place as an honorary member of the “scientific committee” and was later published on the association’s website as part of their PR strategy. Furthermore, while I was open about my misgivings regarding the silver gamer discourse, I still contributed to the *Golden-Age Games* project’s objectives by promoting my own work on video games and older adults. In some workshops, organizers and particularly the institution’s staff took my presence as scientific evidence of video games’ benefits for older adults. On a smaller but more direct scale, local organizers seized my presence as an opportunity to have their complaints, requests, and suggestions relayed to other actors in the project. I was expected to relay expectations and opinions up and down the chain of command. I also unexpectedly became an intermediary between organizers, for instance passing a console around between two distant workshops or transmitting information between organizers and their supervisors. Overall, I was caught in different actors’ efforts to enrol me in order to promote their vision of older adults’ digital play.

2.3. Successful Aging And The Silver Gamer

The silver gamer discourse has strong ties with a perspective that has become a dominant narrative of old age: successful aging. With its emphasis on health maintenance, individual responsibility, and self-optimization, successful aging provides the framework that underpins the silver gamer discourse, which reflects a broad discursive shift about old age. This section outlines what “successful aging” entails in order to bring into view the silver gamer discourse’s role in promoting a specific perspective on aging.

High-Achieving Seniors: The Discourse Of Successful Aging

Successful aging proposes a comprehensive theory of aging as well as a theory of “good old age” that weaves together medical, social, and moral considerations. In that perspective, aging is no longer an ineluctable process to which people are passively subjected. Everyone can age successfully provided that they put in the work to avoid dependency, social isolation, and close-mindedness.

The framework of successful aging (and close predecessors and relatives such as positive aging, active aging, and healthy aging) rose to prominence in the late 20th c. and plays a critical role in the management and experience of old age today. As Rudman (2015:11) notes,

Positive aging discourses, a term being used to encompass various discourses which outline idealized ways to age that involve remaining youthful, healthy, productive, socially engaged and self-reliant, have become central to national and international approaches to governing aging populations, gerontological theory and research, and popular media.

Originally formulated in a German psychology journal in the 1970s, active aging rose to fame in the late 1990s as the central proposal of reports from the OECD and the European Commission as well as several projects implemented by the WHO (Moulaert and Viriot Durandal 2013). It has remained the framework of reference for international organizations since. Its position has been consolidated by its inclusion in the national public policies of several countries, including France. “Active aging” and its successor “successful aging” have enjoyed a surge of popularity in academic and scientific circles in the 2000s. The trajectory of the framework within international organizations has established two priorities: health, with a focus on preventing cognitive and physical decline, and labour, with a focus on re-integrating older adults as productive members of society through formal or informal work.

The framework of successful aging has a strong affinity with biopower. The notion of biopower, introduced by Foucault and developed by Agamben and Negri, comments on the productive nature of power in modernity and the historical shift of politics towards the management of life (Foucault 1975; Rabinow and Rose 2006). Biopolitics rely on discourses but also on

interventions that aim to rationalize and optimize how individual subjects conduct their lives. It has close ties to neoliberalism as an economic and political doctrine. Proponents and actors of neoliberalism understand the citizen as “a *homo œconomicus*[,] entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (Foucault [2004] 2008:226). In a biopolitical regime,

individuals are brought to work on themselves, under certain forms of authority, in relation to truth discourses, by means of practices of the self, in the name of their own life or health, that of their family or some other collectivity, or indeed in the name of the life or health of the population as a whole. (Rabinow and Rose 2006:197)

In that perspective, as states have turned from a punitive to a productive form of power during the transition into Modernity (particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries), some populations (such as “the poor” or “the insane”) have attracted renewed attention from authorities (Foucault 1975). A similar phenomenon started in the late Middle Ages and early Modern era in Europe around the problematization of “the elderly” (Katz 1996). With the advent of neoliberalism, the century-long attempt to discipline “the elderly” has culminated in a biopolitical project about old age that contextualizes the rise of successful aging. As Rudman (2006:195) summarizes, “Agency is to be invested in ‘responsible’ practices that promote self-reflection and improvement, body improvement, risk management and lifestyle construction, in order to achieve self-reliance, individual security, youthfulness and self-fulfilment.” Under the guise of freedom and agency, aging individuals are pressured into adopting specific behaviours, accepting scrutiny and supervision, and assuming responsibility for factors that are largely outside of their control (such as their finances or accidents). If they fail to do so and rely on the State’s resources, older individuals are confined to the devalued category of the fourth age.

The social status and economic structure of old age, particularly its association with a decline in productivity or the end of the working life, constitutes a challenge for biopower. The successful aging discourse offers a compromise: older individuals continue to be worthy citizens insofar as they still hold the potential to be productive. Provided that aging individuals work on themselves (in order not to rely on others or the state) and for others (whether in formal positions or through unpaid care work or volunteering), they should be awarded the same social value and recognition as other adults. Successful aging offers to liberate individuals from the dreaded and devalued identity of “old person” by allowing those who achieve its requirements to escape old age altogether. The successful aging discourse converges with neoliberal expectations about the proper way to live, or in this case the proper way to age, and neoliberal strategies to achieve this goal, with a focus on the possibilities offered by consumer society and technologies of the self (Gilleard and Higgs 2014). It fits into the neoliberal imperative to improve human capital both from the perspective of economic productivity and from the perspective of health maintenance (Allain and Marshall 2017).

While successful aging constitutes a gratifying alternative to dominant representations of aging as decline, it has complex implications for individuals. Successful aging as a political

framework and discourse is an exercise of power: it is fundamentally normative in its efforts to define and promote desirable and undesirable ways to age (Rudman 2015). If it becomes possible to succeed at aging, then it also becomes possible to fail. When failure is blamed on a lack of willpower and self-discipline, aging becomes a matter of individual responsibility. This falls in line with neoliberal expectations that citizens work towards maintaining their embodied selves and rely on themselves rather than any form of group solidarity. This perspective erases the collective and social dimensions of old age, the importance of material conditions in the experience of aging and health, and the inequitable distribution of economic and social resources. In that sense, successful aging further disenfranchises those who are already underprivileged. Moreover, even privileged older individuals often fall short of the expectations of successful aging. In its institutional and medical definitions, successful aging often refers to the absence of illness, decline in functionality, or dependence in old age, which in practice excludes a majority of older adults (Fagerström and Aartsen 2013). While it offers hope, successful aging makes rigorous and sometimes untenable demands on older adults. It defines ideal old age a form of agelessness, but no amount of work on the self can interrupt aging as a physical and social process, an inflexibility of the body that threatens one's sense of self and social personhood (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991).

Successful aging dominates discussions and representations of old age; or at least it does in France. Discourses and images of aging are culturally situated, as anthropological studies of aging demonstrate, and successful aging is not universally relevant. Historically, it has close ties with the advent of Modernity and biopolitics. Katz (1996) traces back the project of disciplining old age to the 17th c., and the discourse of successful aging in its current form emerges in the second half of the 20th c. with the advent of the neoliberal State (Biggs and Powell 2001). Therefore, it is anchored in the same spaces as these socio-economic circumstances: broadly speaking, Western Europe and the global North. Most of the critical literature on aging that I cite throughout my work draws on data from North America and Western and Northern Europe (e.g. Biggs and Powell 2001 on the United Kingdom; Rudman 2015 on Canada; De Schutter *et al.* 2014 on the Netherlands; Repetti 2015 on Switzerland). The analytical category of “the West” or “the global North” are moderately satisfying insofar as these hegemonic spaces have unstable boundaries; in a globalized world, discourses circulate in complex and far-reaching ways. Yet their dissemination is not even or smooth, and the implementation of these discourses by social actors vary depending on cultural and national contexts. In her comparison of Indian and American older adults' perspectives on aging, Lamb (2014) challenges the successful aging discourse's claim to universality and proposes a critical anthropological perspective on understandings of aging. Lamb contrasts her American informants' preoccupation with activity, independence, and the denial of mortality with her Indian informants' casual mentions of their impending death, satisfaction with receiving care from relatives, and disinterest toward projects of self-improvement and health maintenance. This discrepancy highlights the cultural specificity of successful aging but also the connection between discourses of aging and broader cultural values:

North American models of successful aging are so based on certain foundational cultural principles and visions of personhood—for instance, that decline in old age is bad, and that independence is ideal—that it has at times been difficult to recognize successful aging models as particular cultural visions. (p. 42)

Lamb notes that successful aging is not entirely hegemonic among American older adults, and that some of her Indian informants are familiar and in agreement with successful aging. Still, anthropological approaches of aging are crucial reminders that aging is culturally situated. Lynch and Danely (2013) similarly critique a tendency, in studies of aging, to establish a Eurocentric understanding of aging as universal and ideal. Therefore, I reiterate that my analysis and specifically my contention that there is such a thing as the silver gamer discourse are contextually specific to contemporary France. It is nonetheless reasonable to assume that my conclusions are not exclusive to France, if only because the successful aging discourse is not endemic to the country. Furthermore, the literature on aging and technology allows for a cautious generalization of my analysis beyond the specific circumstances of its data collection.

From Normal Aging To Healthy Aging

Health is a core preoccupation in the successful aging perspective. With Modernity, old age has become increasingly medicalized in the sense that it has become primarily conceptualized as a biological process of decline, a paradigm that is exemplified by the rise of geriatrics as the referential framework for aging (Katz 1996). This medicalization of old age is part of a wider shift towards biomedicalization, a process through which a growing number of social phenomena and experiences are categorized as illnesses that call for medical intervention (Zola 1972). Biomedicalization pertains to biopolitics in its involvement in the maintenance and optimization of productive and autonomous citizens. A logic of functionality has supplanted a logic of normalcy insofar as aging individuals should strive for an exceptional old age (featuring no physical or cognitive change) rather than a “normal” experience of old age (Marshall and Katz 2004). Cognitive health is a central concern. Past decades have seen the rise of neuroculture, a perspective that considers human life and social experience chiefly in neuroscientific terms (Williams, Higgs, and Katz 2012). In neuroculture the brain becomes the focus of attention and the object of self-work: it becomes “something of a ‘project’ in its own right, attended by attempts to [...] boost, improve or enhance our brain power” (p. 67). Neuroculture intersects with the discourse of successful aging in their shared preoccupation with “attempts to stall, slow down, protect or prevent neuro-related cognitive decline and degeneration through a variety of cultural pursuits, commercial products, and self-help programs” (p. 67).

Critical studies of aging highlight the unquestioned prevalence of medicalized conceptions of old age among professionals of old age and policymakers (Joyce and Loe 2010). Such conceptions further entrench the idea that aging is an illness or a collection of illnesses that call for cures and treatment. Successful aging overlaps with older conceptualizations of old age as

decline in its focus on aging as a deterioration that calls for medical intervention. On that front, successful aging does not depart from other discourses on aging but reinforces and perpetuates them. Biggs and Powell (2011:4-5) note that successful aging and aging as decline “are contradictory in their relation to notions of autonomy, independence, and dependency on others, yet linked through the importance of techniques for maintenance, either via medicalized bodily control or through the adoption of ‘golden-age’ lifestyles.” The emergence of anti-aging medicine illustrates the connection between the medicalization of aging and its problematization (Fishman, Settersten Jr, and Flatt 2010). Because of its focus on restoring or preventing changes related to aging, successful aging arguably contains an anti-aging component. Successful aging is indeed fundamentally about not aging at all, or at least not visibly. As Featherstone and Wernick (1995:9-10) explain, “positive aging does not provide the solutions to the problems of deep old age and death: its message is essentially one of denial, keep smiling and carry on consuming.”

While successful aging has expanded beyond the boundaries of scientific research and medical practice, becoming a referential policy framework and discourse, the concept of successful aging has its roots in gerontology. Several perspectives of successful aging coexist: some analyses prioritize functionality (the binary measurement of someone’s in/ability to perform certain tasks) while others prefer to use performance scores; some centre around older adults’ ability to maintain balance in their lives and others focus on older adults’ ability to adapt to new circumstances (Fagerström and Aartsen 2013). Besides the original formulation of active aging in the 1977 issue of the *German Zeitschrift Für Alternforschung* (e.g. Eitner 1977, cited in Moulart and Viriot-Durandal 2013), one of the most influential and cited texts on the matter is Rowe and Kahn’s “Human aging: usual and successful” (1987). They define successful aging as the absence of disease or disability and the limitation of functional losses. This is evaluated with three criteria: a low probability of disease or disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and an active engagement with life. The authors posit that this goal can be attained through health promotion and prevention. The framework thus reinforces the equivalence between aging, biological decline, diminishing functionality, and declining health, as well as the imperative to fight back against the aging process. The only factor that is not directly related to health, “active engagement with life”, sets an additional objective of continued productivity that reinforces the association of individual worth with economic worth.

Successful aging’s emphasis on health as performance has caught the attention of health researchers who have formulated a series of remarks that complement critiques of the biopolitical dimension of successful aging. In an extensive review of the gerontological critiques of successful aging, Martinson and Berridge (2015) identify three main issues with the model: limited empirical applicability, a discrepancy between the model and older adults’ perspective on aging, and disputable underlying assumptions (such as the ableist, individualist, and neoliberal understandings of old age that successful aging perpetuates). By design, the framework defines disability or illness as a failure and determines that people who live with functional limitations cannot age in a meaningful and satisfying way. Successful aging is defined by such narrow conditions that most older adults do not qualify for it. Fagerström and

Aartsen (2013) point out the discrepancy between the number of older adults who age successfully according to this framework and the number of older adults who feel that they are aging successfully. The authors used the data from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam to test whether good health is associated with aging successfully in older adults' experience. They conclude that "decline in domains generally considered as crucial for successful aging – absence of disease and high functional and cognitive capacity – showed the weakest correlations to decline in well-being" (p. 73). Strawbridge, Wallhagen, and Cohen (2002) find similar results when comparing Rowe and Kahn's definition of successful aging with disabled and chronically ill individuals' self-assessment of their aging experience. The authors cite the "disability paradox", a notion formulated in 1999 by Albrecht and Devlieger to describe the fact that a significant proportion of people who live with disabilities report a good to excellent quality of life, in contrast with ableist assumptions that the life of a disabled person cannot be enjoyable.

Disability studies constitute a rich perspective to question medicalized frameworks of aging. It is however important not to conflate the experience of aging with disability. Disability is not a universal experience among older adults, including the oldest of the old. Additionally, different or changing abilities in old age are associated with representations that are distinct from those of disabilities at other life stages. Nonetheless, as the growth of geriatrics has progressively come to define old age as a form of pathology that closely resembles a chronic illness, disability studies offer relevant insights into aging. Minkler and Fadem (2002) propose an analysis of successful aging from the perspective of disability studies. They note that the successful aging framework essentializes disability and defines disabled people as people who cannot function. The social model of disability states that disability is not an embodied state so much as a matter of unequally accessible accommodations and compensatory strategies which are related to material and economic resources (Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 1998). Minkler and Fadem conclude that successful aging sets a standard of complete bodily autonomy that is neither universally attainable nor necessary to live fulfilling life in old age, and in fact at any age.

"What Are You Going To Do When You Retire?": Older Adults And Successful Aging

The discourse of successful aging is a constitutive element of older adults' experience. In France, it has been the reference framework for old age for over two decades. The "Bien vieillir" national action plan of 2007 established its centrality in public policy. Its language elements first spread through public institutions that offer services to older adults and provide funding to actors in the field of aging. As a result, older adults are surrounded by the successful aging discourse. This subsection explores the ways in which older adults engage with successful aging.

Older adults relate to successful aging's emphasis on health in complex and nuanced ways. Successful aging offers a substitute to the negative images commonly associated with aging. It echoes the tension between the third age and the fourth age, in which the former constitutes a

desirable pole and the latter a repulsive pole of old age (Gilleard and Higgs 2014). While the third age evokes dynamic seniors and a fulfilling retirement, the fourth age stands as an abject version of old age characterized by disease, dependence, and the deterioration of personhood (Gilleard and Higgs 2011). To aging individuals, the third age stands as a desirable alternative. Its promise of an old age unplagued by illness is generally favourably received by older adults. Consequently, while it is rare that individuals wholly and unconditionally embrace the successful aging discourse, many older adults share its preoccupation with health maintenance. But they reconcile different conceptualizations of health in old age, treating it simultaneously as an individual capital to which they should tend and an inevitable decline over which they have limited control (Jolanki, Jylhä, and Hervonen 2000; Jolanki 2008).

Paradoxically, one of the central elements of the successful aging discourse is relatively peripheral in older adults' accounts. In interviews, older players rarely mention health maintenance, neither on its own nor in relation to video games. Still, some interviewees do broach the topic. Marie describes health as a challenge and a responsibility for older adults: "What we need to do, however, is to ensure that people our age still have to be a little bit healthy. Because if, mentally, they become less healthy and become a bit dependent, it's much more difficult."⁷⁸ A few interviewees mention cognitive health and associate it with leisure activities, like Michel: "And so, um, reading, um, building stuff and tinkering, um, playing a card game, um, really listening to some music, um, doing a lot of things like that [...] You see, all that, it gets the brain working."⁷⁹

Older adults are comparatively more receptive to the successful aging discourse's emphasis on physical health. The importance of exercise regularly comes up in interviewees' accounts and workshop participants' discussions. In both cases, older adults present physical exercise as a necessity to maintain one's health but also as a moral imperative. Older adults have a broad understanding of what qualifies as exercise and the term covers a variety of physical activities including going to the gym, attending yoga classes, going for a walk, or doing stretching exercises in the morning. Older adults' narratives reflect the pressure that older adults face regarding health maintenance and specifically physical activity (Allain and Marshall 2017). When older adults are not engaging in what they feel is a proper amount of physical activity, they often frame it as a failure on their part, like this *Golden-Age Games* participant who said that she was ashamed of her "laziness". A similar preoccupation comes up in interviews: "I know I should be walking; I should force myself to go for walks, I don't do it."⁸⁰ Whether they engage in regular physical activity or not, older adults frame exercise as an obligation. They say: "I make myself" exercise, "I should force myself to go for a walk", "I make myself go for

⁷⁸"Ce qu'il faut quand même malgré tout c'est que les personnes de nos âges ils aient quand même un peu une santé. Parce que si, mentalement, ils la perdent et ils deviennent un peu dépendants, c'est beaucoup plus difficile."

⁷⁹"Et donc, euh, lire, euh, bricoler, c'est-à-dire chercher quelquefois à réparer quelque chose qui est réticent, euh, faire un jeu de cartes, euh, écouter attentivement de la musique, euh, faire des tas de trucs comme ça [...]. Vous voyez, tout ça, ça fait fonctionner le cerveau".

⁸⁰"Je sais que je devrais marcher, je devrais m'obliger à marcher, ça je le fais pas."

walks”⁸¹. Their conception of physical exercise does not include video games, even the *Wii Sports* exergames played in *Golden-Age Games* workshops.

Old age and specifically retirement are governed by a “busy ethic” that prolongs the work ethic and encourages perpetual and ideally productive activity (Ekerdt 1986). In workshops and interviews alike, older adults talk at length about their schedule, how busy they are, how time flies by, *etc.* Several explain that a busy lifestyle is a positive sign and/or a condition for a successful old age. Even the interviewees who engage in a small number of activities describe their day in terms that evoke a race against the clock. Several interviewees report that they purposefully looked for something to do when their career slowed down or came to an end. Marie explains: “So you know, at that time [...] I thought “I need to do something else with my life”.”⁸² She contacted volunteer organizations until she found a neighbourhood centre that needed a leader for a knitting workshop. It is an exhausting and demanding activity, per her own account, but it is rewarding: “When I come back, I’m all done for, I sit in the armchair and nap. [...] and I’m happy. Because I did something.”⁸³ Alain’s involvement started small but quickly escalated:

Ah well, that's just coincidence, because we have a little local newspaper published every six months by the town [...] And then I saw, we're looking for, we've lost our facilitator. They call it the Cyber-Workshop. Ah, I thought to myself, ah yes, why not. I applied. Then I wanted to get involved a bit more in the board of directors of our Hall and then in the departmental federation.⁸⁴

Chantal, who has been an activist all her life, relied on her network of friends to find something to do in retirement:

so quite by chance, I have a girlfriend, Anne, and I was talking to her. [...] And she said, she told me “What are you going to do when you retire?” I told her “Look, I absolutely need to find an association with powerful ideas”, and she said “Ah, I have an old friend who...”, so I called the old friend who said, “Ah well I’m looking for someone!”, and that’s how it happened.⁸⁵

⁸¹ “je m’astreins”, “je devrais m’obliger à marcher”, “je me force à marcher”.

⁸² “Pour vous dire, à cette période-là [...] je me dis “Il faut que je fasse quelque chose d’autre dans ma vie”.”

⁸³ “Quand je reviens, je suis HS, je me mets dans le fauteuil et je m’endors. [...] et puis je suis contente. Parce que j’ai fait quelque chose.”

⁸⁴ “Ah bah c’est le hasard, parce qu’on a une petite feuille de chou qui paraît tous les six mois au niveau de la commune [...] Et là j’ai vu, on recherche, on a perdu notre animateur. Ils appellent ça le Cyber-Atelier. Ah je me suis dit, ah oui pourquoi pas. Je me suis présenté. Alors après j’ai voulu m’investir un peu plus au niveau Conseil d’administration de notre foyer et puis de la fédération départementale.”

⁸⁵ “alors tout à fait par hasard j’ai une copine, une copine, Anne, avec qui je discutais [...]. Et elle disait, elle me dit “Qu’est-ce que tu vas faire à la retraite ?” Je lui dis “Écoute il faut absolument que je trouve une assoc’ avec des belles idées”, et elle me dit “Ah j’ai une vieille copine qui”, alors j’ai joint la vieille copine qui, elle m’a dit “Ah bah je cherche”, et voilà ça s’est fait comme ça.”

Chantal also works part-time at an AMAP store (a cooperative that supports local farming) and she got involved in a third volunteer job (teaching French to migrant workers) through the AMAP mailing list. For some interviewees, aging has to be full of projects, when it is not a project in itself: “In fact, [you should] tell yourself, this is what, on the first day of your actual retirement, it will be the first day of a new project.”⁸⁶

Older adults are not impervious to the discourse of successful aging. They tend to assimilate the preoccupations of successful aging into their worldview — not in the sense that they necessarily agree with its premises or implement its principles, but in the sense that they position themselves in relation to the norms and expectations of successful aging. Illustrations abound in the literature: about physical health (Craciun and Flick 2015), physical exercise (Allain and Marshall 2017), narratives of old age (van Dyk *et al.* 2013), and activity and busyness (Repetti 2015). A similar pattern comes up in older players’ accounts: they regularly refer to expectations that they, and others, have regarding their health and level of activity in old age, even if they do not follow these expectations:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] Two participants are taking a break from whatever they were doing on their laptop and tablet. They start chatting: the man explains that he used to belong to a walking group and says, “It’s necessary”. The woman answers that she is aware of that, and in fact was supposed to go for a walk this morning, but she decided to come to the workshop instead.

In summary, older adults have a complex relationship with the successful aging discourse, but a relationship nonetheless; and older adults’ digital play takes place in this ambivalent context.

“We Wish You A Good Old Age!”: Successful Aging In Video Game Workshops

The *Golden-Age Games* project has an equivocal relationship with the successful aging discourse. Within the association and its network, different understandings of aging and older adults’ play coexist: some are aligned with the project’s initial vocation (helping older adults age successfully thanks to video games) while others have distanced themselves from or added considerable nuance to this perspective (emphasizing older players’ skill as esports players, striving for older adults’ empowerment, or prioritizing fun over medical benefits). Still, successful aging is one of the three missions of *Golden-Age Games*, as mentioned in its Charter and throughout the project’s documentation. Successful aging comes up in opening speeches during competitions, for instance when the representative of a local institution that supports the project concludes: “The association [*Golden-Age Games*] wishes you a successful old age!”⁸⁷ References to successful aging also crop up in the spaces where workshops take place, for

⁸⁶“En fait se dire, voilà ce que, au premier jour de de la retraite effective, ça va être le premier jour d’un nouveau projet.”

⁸⁷“L’association [*Golden-Age Games*] vous souhaite de bien vieillir !”

instance in the form of leaflets and posters that encourage older adults to “age successfully!” (by exercising more, eating better, engaging with a local institution or leisure activity, *etc.*) in nursing homes’ common rooms.

The *Golden-Age Games* project matches well with the successful aging ethos and its performance. Public events and competitions dedicated to older adults create opportunities to promote the figure of the active and dynamic senior (Grenier and Valois-Nadeau 2013). The *Golden-Age Games* workshops and competitions fulfill a function similar to the *Etoile des Aînés* contest in Grenier and Valois-Nadeau’s analysis: they are “devices in and through which one tries out one’s value and qualities, [and] that qualified witnesses can attest to it” (p. 140, my own translation). The *Golden-Age Games* project has built its own esports competition circuit, in which older adults can demonstrate their technical and physical skills, their close relationships with volunteers, and their ease with digital technology. Audiences in local and regional competitions act as witnesses of participants’ successful aging.

An emphasis on health, which is a defining feature of the successful aging framework, pervades the *Golden-Age Games* project. It is in part a reaction to the expectations of public authorities and private foundations that are funding *Golden-Age Games*. The argument that video games are good for older adults’ cognitive and physical health matches with policymakers’ preoccupation with population aging and dependency in old age. It also matters that *Golden-Age Games* workshops are primarily hosted in aged care institutions and particularly in nursing homes. Nursing home staff have been trained and professionally socialized to interpret the actions of older adults in medical terms. They impart upon other organizers (and especially volunteers) the idea that aging is, at its core, a constant struggle against cognitive and physical decline. At the beginning of the year, local coordinators often set up training sessions for volunteers. A frequent feature of these training programs is a conference on the health issues associated with aging. Medical professionals and social workers explain to volunteers that aging is a process of bodily decline and a slow (or quick) disappearance of one’s abilities.

The medicalization of aging is reinforced by the role granted to medical professionals during the workshops. Health professionals rarely attend the workshop, but when they do, other organizers refer to them as indisputable experts and authorities on old age. This solidifies the status of video games as medical technology and a therapeutic tool in this context. Medical professionals attended three of the thirty workshops I visited: a doctor who performed a demonstration of the *EHPAD*’s care robot, a psychologist who had a conversation with me at the request of the *EHPAD*’s leisure supervisor, and a physical therapist who regularly attends the workshops. The latter’s presence in the workshop illustrates how medical professionals claim authority and expertise over video games:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] This workshop is quite crowded with organizers since it is attended by two volunteers, their local coordinator, the nursing home’s leisure supervisor, and the institution’s physical therapist. The therapist takes up

a lot of room: she energetically walks around the (otherwise quiet) room, makes comments about participants' play, and talks with the coordinator and me. [...]

She has a lot of ideas about "the elderly" and technology. She tells me about the benefits of video games for older adults. She is very pro-technology and specifically pro-digital games as long as technology is "a means rather than a goal in itself". She argues that technology helps older adults become more autonomous and motivate them because of its novelty value, "like children with a toy". [...]

I can't help but notice that the physical therapist does not seem to perform any kind of physical therapy (e.g. correcting people's postures or gestures), although I may be wrong. [...] The physical therapist tells a participant playing a tablet game (a memory, I believe) to "click" (I can't see the screen, but I'm not sure how this instruction is useful, since the participant has been playing on her own for a while now and has probably grasped the game's mechanisms by now). The participant loses the game, and the therapist laughs and walks away. [...]

I chat with the coordinator while volunteers pack up. She tells me that the workshops should always have a medical professional present at all times, and that there should be workshops all year long because "the elderly" need at least a year to master the Wii. She seems to be repeating what the physical therapist told her earlier (I heard them).

The workshops function like an echo chamber that reinforces a medicalized understanding of aging among organizers.

2.4. The Gamification Of Old Age

The silver gamer discourse's success rests on the discursive shift surrounding video games. In reaction to 1990s moral panics, various actors have attempted to reframe video games as a harmless and even valuable practice, emphasizing instrumental play and video games' purported benefits. The silver gamer discourse benefits from, and contributes to, this effort to revalue video games by making them productive. It merges successful aging's techno-solutionism with the rehabilitation of video games, with gamification as a junction point. Gamification, which posits that games have the potential to inconspicuously nudge individuals towards desirable behaviours, fits with the argument that video games can help individuals age better. In that sense, the silver gamer discourse promotes a gamified approach to old age, drawing on an existing narrative that frames video games as resources for training and self-improvement.

Rehabilitating Video Games

A narrative about the benefits and productive potential of video games has contributed to their rehabilitation in the past decade. Since the late 2000s, a positive discourse on video games has gained momentum and progressively displaced moral panics that associate video games with addiction, violence, and social isolation. This discourse focuses on the same themes that moral panics popularized but reverses the narrative: video games have effects on their players, but those are positive instead of negative effects. Video games have health benefits, particularly in terms of cognitive training and psychological well-being, they have artistic value, and they facilitate collective action and activism. These talking points shift video games from "noxious objects" into "redemptive devices" (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). Simon (2017:10) summarizes the techno-enthusiastic discourses that imbue games with benefits, if not superpowers: "Games can make persuasive arguments, right? Solve social problems, right? Lift us to new aesthetic heights, right? Reform criminals, right? Hell yes, game designers are the new social engineers!"

The rehabilitation of video games relies on a techno-enthusiastic line of reasoning that attributes powerful positive effects to video games. Starting in the 2000s, industry representatives, game makers, and journalists, among other actors, have countered moral panics with enthusiastic accounts of video games' positive effects on their players (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). Serious games and gamified digital experiences have spearheaded the rehabilitation of video games (Mauco 2008). By distancing video games from the notion of unruly and non-productive play, the phrase "serious gaming" has augmented their acceptability (Bogost 2011). It has ushered in the notion that video games have positive effects on their players, which later expanded beyond games specifically designed for this purpose. These effects are supposed to play out at the individual scale, with video games as educational tools and cognitive training, and on a collective scale, with video games renewing collaborative action and grassroots politics. Carbone & Ruffino express their skepticism towards this shift and its updated take on the

technological determinism of former moral panics, citing Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter's *Games of Empire* (2009) on the potential of video games for disciplining citizens and exploiting workers.

In reaction to the moral panics of the 1990s, various actors have come together in the 2000s to rehabilitate video games as an object and a practice. Carbone and Ruffino (2012:35) highlight that “[t]his change is not determined by the growth of the industry or any other statistical factor but, being a discursive change, it is mostly the spontaneous convergence of a variety of professional, social and individual needs for legitimization”. Industry representatives, state officials, and actors from the cultural field all benefit from promoting video games as a creative, popular, and technologically advanced domain. The context has been particularly favourable to a convergence between the State and a flourishing industry in search of cultural legitimacy (Dauncey 2012). Symbolic gestures, institutional integration, and public subsidies have solidified video games’ position as a cultural object and industry. Actors from the cultural field, from museum curators to local librarians, have been particularly involved in the rehabilitation of video games. To them, video games may be the next frontier for contemporary arts, an undervalued form of popular culture that deserves to be acknowledged, or simply an attractive medium that can lure children and teenagers into cultural institutions. Influential individuals involved in the cultural field have acted as cultural intermediaries to introduce video games into museums, festivals, and artist residencies, creating opportunities for game designers to be recognized as artists (Coville 2014). Communities of players contribute to the legitimization process, particularly in their appropriation and diffusion of positive narratives on video games (Bourgonjon *et al.* 2016). Game studies in France have similarly contributed to the promotion of video games (Meunier 2017). Academics have a decisive role in the production of information (especially statistics and studies) used by the State, the industry, and other actors to promote video games.

The promotion of video games comes with its challenges. The coalition of actors who participate in the legitimization project pursue different goals and rely on distinct arguments that sometimes clash. Furthermore, the celebration of video games also stifles the possibility of a critical perspective on video games, which becomes conflated with a return of moral panics and the unfair stigmatization of games. But video games, particularly their production process and player communities and cultures, still have significant issues and negative consequences for those who are involved in them (Leonard 2006; Consalvo 2012; Vossen 2018). The affinity of video games with neoliberal governmentality, and their use as tools of surveillance and discipline, warrants critical examination (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 2009; Whitson and Simon 2014). A narrow focus on the effects of video games is necessarily incomplete because it results from a simplistic understanding of the relationship between media and audiences (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). Finally, the celebration of games’ positive effects is often overly optimistic and does not reflect the ambivalence of scientific research on the matter – as is the case for play in general (Sutton-Smith 1997). But the actors who work towards the rehabilitation of video games can count on a significant asset: the reputation of play as a powerful tool to teach, motivate, and train their players into behaviours that reach beyond the realm of the game.

From “Rational Leisure” To Gamification

A frequent argument in discourses that call for the rehabilitation of video games is their potential for social engineering through instrumental play and gamification. Cited in Bonenfant and Genvo’s (2014) critical analysis of gamification, the title of the book written by game designer, theorist, and advocate Jane McGonigal (2011) summarizes this perspective: “Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World”. Video games revive an age-old interest in play’s ability to induce behaviours or disseminate messages. It has its roots in the rhetoric of play as progress which interprets play “as having value not just for itself but because of other functions that it serves in individual development and group culture” (Sutton-Smith 1997:18). While the rhetoric of progress has a long history, several features of modernity have cemented its role as the framework of reference for play. It is particularly amenable to a worldview that reasons in terms of functionality and optimization. The rhetoric of progress proposes that play trains adaptive skills and thus both serves an evolutionary purpose and grants an advantage to species/individuals who engage in play. In psychological theories of the 20th c., play is necessary for individuals to develop properly insofar as it teaches them to adapt to new circumstances (Mellou 1994). While the literature on play focuses on children, their reasoning has occasionally been extended into adulthood (Erikson 1977). Overall, “[t]he history of play studies is in some sense a history of the various attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of play for individuals and societies” (Henricks 2008:166). Moral entrepreneurs draw on this scientific literature to defend play as a useful and thus respectable endeavour.

The instrumental perspective on play posits that if play fulfills a purpose and has positive repercussions for players then it can also be tweaked with the explicit intent of obtaining certain effects. Attempts to instrumentalize play, that is, assign it an extrinsic goal, have enjoyed a renewed popularity with the advent of modernity and capitalism and later neoliberal governmentality. As Cross (2008) shows in his study of play in colonial North America, a modern history of play is a history of the state and other authorities’ various attempts to transform play into something productive. The late 18th c. is a turning point as Puritans switch gears from the condemnation of play and leisure altogether to the promotion of an “improved” form of leisure that “joineth pleasure and profit together” (Richard Baxter, quoted in Cross 2008:18). The doctrine of “rational leisure” that emerged in the 19th c. pursued a similar objective of replacing unruly forms of leisure with productive ones. Middle-class reformers were particularly preoccupied with workers’ use of their free time, arguing that they ought to take advantage of their leisure to improve themselves (by attending night classes, educational events, or church services). The mobilization of play is a common political strategy, most often used to foster a sense of community or exercise power (Sutton-Smith 1997) but also to shape citizens through leisure. The features of modern play are reminiscent of the biopolitical project: it is fundamentally active, associated with order and rules, preoccupied with performance and progress, institutionalized, with an emphasis on technology, and unequivocally instrumental (Henricks 2016).

The use of play for skill training, individual improvement, or economic production is epitomized by the phenomenon of gamification. Gamification describes the integration of game-like mechanics in non-playful contexts to facilitate engagement in otherwise unappealing activities. Because it interrogates the boundaries between play and non-play and between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, this definition has sparked academic controversy and remains debatable (Bogost 2011; Deterding *et al.* 2011; Genvo 2013). But the concept of gamification highlights that there is a historical and political continuity in the mobilization of play for self-improvement or productivity. Indeed, gamification is not a modern invention. Early examples of explicit gamification include several 18th c. productions such as the “Pious Lottery” prayer-book-and-card-game mix, the “Kirnberger’s Ever-ready Minuet and Polonaise Composer” ludic musical generator, and Mark Twain’s “Memory Builder” used among other things to teach his daughters the regnal dates of English monarchs (Fuchs 2014). Gamification has proven particularly amenable to contemporary neoliberal governmentality as a technology of the self through which individuals engage in productive work in a fun and entertaining way (Schrape 2014). From its rise to popularity in marketing circles, the notion has reached a variety of domains and fields, including education and professional training, finance, research and development, health, *etc.* Gamification aims to help individuals to master skills, incorporate behaviours, or absorb information, with the perk that players are training themselves to become a better version of themselves without realizing it, in a fun and painless way, in line with the principles of behaviourism (Bonenfant and Genvo 2014). This marks gamification as a proper technology of the self, congruent with the neoliberal injunction to augment one’s human capital.

Video games possess characteristics that make them particularly suitable for gamification. Although gamification can take non-digital forms, for instance when an employer sets up “challenges” that use game mechanisms such as scores, leaderboards, and rewards (Le Lay 2013), video games are the most discussed form of gamification. The “serious games” mentioned above propose to harness the appeal of video games (such as fun, motivation, immersion) to further educational or informational goals (Alvarez *et al.* 2011). Because of their technical characteristics and status as a consumer entertainment technology, video games lend themselves to gamification setups and governance projects. Video games are well-equipped to make dreary and repetitive work exciting and attractive, like the many other “liberating gadgets” that Boltanski and Chiapello examine in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999, cited in Kirkpatrick 2013). They also provide exceptional opportunities for surveillance through extensive, and often covert, data collection (Whitson and Simon 2014). Bonenfant and Genvo (2014:6, my own translation) note that through gamification “one favours, in the name of play, a vision of the economic system based on accumulation, efficiency and productivity.” Through their stories and play mechanics, in their production and their consumption, video games are arguably “games of Empire” (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 2009).

The Shortcomings of Techno-Enthusiasm

The rehabilitation of video games draws on a technological deterministic view that attributes powerful effects to technology. As Carbone and Ruffino (2012) show, contemporary discourses on video games perpetuate moral panics' emphasis on the effects of games on their players, and as such, they do not depart from standard deterministic paradigms. Media panics denounce insidious and manipulative objects that appeal to the emotions of vulnerable audiences to spread immoral and dangerous notions (Drotner 1999). Techno-enthusiasm celebrates entertaining and attractive objects that trick otherwise passive audiences into engaging in productive and valuable activities. The pattern is fundamentally the same and relies on the fetishization of technology as an irresistible force that transforms its users (Pfaffenberger 1988). Early reactions to a technology generally feature anxieties and censure, but also a form of techno-enthusiasm, particularly among those who would benefit from widespread adoption of said technology: "Scarcely a new invention comes along that someone doesn't proclaim it as the salvation of a free society" (Winner 1980:20). Techno-enthusiasm positions technological objects as rational and efficient solutions to problems that would otherwise call for messy and contentious political interventions. Social, ethical, and philosophical difficulties become mere technical challenges. Yet the belief in the promises of technology, which frames technological innovation as the gateway to an inevitable and desirable future, is an eminently political one (Saint-Martin and Compagnon 2019).

Techno-enthusiasm is a defining feature of the successful aging discourse. Domínguez-Rué and Nierling (2016:11) note that "in Western countries technologies, and especially ICT, are increasingly positioned as the solution to the problems usually associated with aging." The field of gerontechnology exemplifies successful aging's affinity for a techno-enthusiastic outlook. Gerontechnology aims to harness technology, specifically new and innovative technology, to make the lives of aging individuals easier and delay or compensate for difficulties associated with aging, particularly physiological and cognitive decline (Fozard, Rietsema, and Bouma 2000). Gerontechnological projects face many limitations, and their implementation is often tumultuous (Östlund 2004; Peine *et al.* 2015; Argoud 2016). Their portrayal by the media and institutions is however overwhelmingly positive. They enjoy substantial support from public authorities, as illustrated by the establishment of the Silver Economic sector.

Video games have benefited from such techno-enthusiastic perspectives surrounding "digital technology" and "new technology". The inscription of video games within both these categories highlights that they are socially and culturally constituted rather than strictly technical. Video games are indeed hardly new and passed through several other classifications, from electronic toys to Information Technology, before landing in the category of "digital technology" (Blanchet and Montagnon 2020). Video games have been a technological innovation for over half a century. Their promotion is one outlet among others of "[t]his naive faith in progress, reinvented by every generation, which underlies the profane discourse that promotes *ad nauseam* the virtues of digital technology" (Saint-Martin and Compagnon 2019:14, my own translation). This promotional discourse, fuelled by grand promises from the industry and a constant stream of academic studies and media reports on the potential of digital technology, have provided the necessary backdrop for the drastic discursive shift regarding video games.

Indeed, individuals and institutions are primed to accept claims that video games are good memory training or facilitate inter-generational relationships.

The media coverage and academic literature on video games and older adults have cemented the notion that video games have powerful health benefits (Iversen 2016). This idea is generally held as a matter of common sense among *Golden-Age Games* organizers and rarely questioned by their audiences. Yet the medical literature does not put forward a clear consensus on video games' effects on older adults' health. Most studies do hypothesize that video game training improves older adults' health. Video games could be, to quote some enthusiastic titles, a “panacea for elderly people” (Wiemeyer and Kliem 2011), a way of “persuading older adults to socialize and exercise” (Cornejo *et al.* 2012), or the path to “successful aging” (Allaire *et al.* 2013). In that perspective, video games have the potential to become therapeutic allies of healthy aging:

By integrating game design with principles of neuroscience and psychology, we argue the motivational and engaging properties of games can be used to help patients achieve a higher dosage of movements recommended by neurological theories of rehabilitation. [...] In either event, games should be regarded as a therapeutic tool (potentially a powerful tool) that can be intelligently integrated into rehabilitation by qualified therapists. (Lohse *et al.* 2003:173)

However, there is no unequivocal evidence that video games can improve older adults' health or that video games are better than other non-playful therapeutic interventions. Many studies find no statistically significant improvements in the physical, cognitive, and psychological performance of older adults after video game training (see for instance Bainbridge *et al.* 2011, on balance; Charness 2015, on cognitive decline; Boot *et al.* 2008, on cognitive performances). Reviews on the benefits of video games for older adults' health, such as Boot *et al.* (2011) and Toril *et al.* (2014), note the existence of contradictory evidence. The heterogeneity of the results is perhaps best illustrated by a quote from Larsen *et al.*'s (2013:4) review, here on video game training and balance in older adults:

Five studies evaluated the effect of exergames on balance performance. Of these five studies, two studies reported an improved effect on balance of exergaming compared with, respectively, no exercise or exercise, one study found traditional exercise to be more effective than exergaming, one study reported similar effects, and one study reported no effect.

Studies that do find positive results are often undermined by several methodological and conceptual limitations. The methodological heterogeneity of the literature limits the comparability of studies' results. They measure various abilities with different tests (on balance, energy expenditure, reaction time, memory, processing speed, attention, anxiety, aggressiveness, depression, etc.), in different settings (university laboratory, home, care institution, hospital), over variable lengths of time, and with different types of games (games custom-made and

designed by medical researchers, commercial games, games branded as “brain-training”, games characterized as “exergames”). Boot *et al.* (2011) also point out that most studies rely on a comparison between an experimental group where older adults play video games and a control group where older adults are not doing anything. Consequently, the positive results found in those studies cannot be attributed with certainty to video games: the improvements may merely be the consequence of being active (as opposed to sitting around in a laboratory or alone at home). Moreover, even in studies that find that video games have benefits for older adults' health, video games are often less efficient than other comparable activities. For instance, Nacke *et al.* (2009) compare the effects of video game training and pen-and-paper games on cognitive performance. They find that, for older adults, pen-and-paper games are more effective, although video games are more motivating. A heavily debated issue is that of skill transfer and whether training with video games improves skills outside of the context of the game. The literature on the matter has not reached a consensus, as two oft cited and contradictory studies suggest (Basak *et al.* 2008; Belchior *et al.* 2013).

The most consistent results on the positive effects of video games on the health of older adults pertain to mental health and specifically to enjoyment, motivation, and mood improvement. Hall *et al.*'s (2012) review concludes that studies on older adults and video games find psychological benefits significantly more often than physical or social benefits. Wollersheim *et al.* (2010) find that during focus groups, participants feel that playing video games has increased their activity level, while physical tests and questionnaires report no increase in activity level or energy expenditure. Video games mostly influence patients' motivation to exercise: participants tend to work more often, harder, and longer with video games than with conventional exercises such as physical therapy, as Wiemeyer *et al.*'s (2011) review points out. However, even on that issue, contradictory results exist. Studies point to the reluctant use of video games by older adults who are either intimidated by the technology or put off by the apparent unseriousness of the activity (Laver *et al.* 2011).

Such uncertain results contextualize the claims about video games' health benefits for older adults. The discrepancy between the common-sense assertion that video games are good for older adults and the nuanced results of the scientific literature highlights the discursive and performative nature of statements about video games' benefits. Individuals who mention the benefits of video games generally do so in good faith. The coverage of the topic in mainstream media is enthusiastic, irrespective of the results, and individuals are primed to believe in narratives that propose to harness the powers of technology for the greater good. I do not intend to indict promoters of the silver gamer discourse or older players for their enthusiasm, but to situate it as an artifact of the silver gamer discourse. Furthermore, even if digital play did possess healing powers, the exclusive focus on health in older adults' video game play raises questions. As Iversen (2016:19-20) notes in her analysis of the scientific literature on video games and older adults,

It should be continually discussed and questioned why some players are allowed to play for the sheer pleasure of it while others can only meaningfully engage with digital games if there is a greater good to be obtained by it.

Conclusion

A discourse on older adults and video games has emerged at the intersection of successful aging and the rehabilitation of video games. The latter's instrumental perspective on video games' benefits aligns with contemporary understandings of old age that value productivity, health maintenance, and self-optimization. This context has set the stage for the emergence of the silver gamer, a figure that pervades media accounts, institutional perspectives, and academic research on older adults and video games. A network of actors rooted in the associative sector, aged care institutions, academia, and the silver economy have rallied around the figure of the disciplined and zealous older video game player.

The silver gamer discourse's success alters older adults' relationship with video games. It promotes an instrumental and health-centred attitude towards play that shapes the opportunities available to older adults. Games and initiatives geared towards older adults often emphasize exergames, motion-controlled devices, family play, or cognitive training. Few other game genres and practices are represented in marketing, events, or spaces that explicitly address older adults who play video games.

The silver gamer discourse has an ambiguous role in older adults' video game play. On one hand, it provides them with a desirable identity and positive narrative (in stark contrast with the figure of the incongruous older player). On the other, it does not challenge the association between video games and youth or question older adults' exclusion from gaming culture and spaces. The silver gamer discourse creates a space for older video game players, but it is a narrow space set apart from other players. It makes older adults' play more visible, but in terms that stigmatize old age as a period of decline and struggle.

Moreover, the silver gamer discourse is limited in its scope. While it is very visible in some corners of the video game field, the silver gamer is not necessarily a familiar figure for older players who pay no attention to gaming or tech innovation. Furthermore, discourses are not predestination. Discourses matter insofar as they shape the horizon of possibilities and establish structuring representations, but those productive practices and narratives are constantly adjusted, negotiated, and contested by the actors involved in them. The next chapter looks at the encounter of the silver game discourse with older adults' actual play, paying close attention to the disruptive, the conflictual, and the unexpected.

CHAPTER 3. UNRULY GAMERS

Unsettling And Evading The Silver Gamer Discourse

“And so my daughter told me ‘Since I don’t want you to lose your mind, mum, you must keep on playing!’”

Nathalie

During a discussion about *Golden-Age Games*’ rapid growth⁸⁸, a coordinator confides in me that they struggle to find suitable host institutions for the workshops despite the high demand for initiatives like *Golden-Age Games*. The coordinator explains that, for instance, they decided not to renew their partnership with a senior centre for the following year. The coordinator takes issue with participants’ reactions and criticizes them for behaving “like consumers”. They do “whatever they want and nothing else” and regularly refuse to play *Wii Bowling* (as they prefer other forms of play or uses of digital technology). The coordinator concludes with an argument that I would hear several times over the next months: nursing homes are a better fit for the project because their residents will agree to anything, while participants in other aged care institutions and leisure centres are more selective because they can go out and find other options more easily.

That informal interview brings to light the challenges in implementing silver gamer principles in practice, but also the limited control that older adults are granted over their play. In this chapter, I investigate the complex and at times contentious relationship between older players and the silver gamer discourse. The actors involved in older adults’ play have divergent perspectives and interests on the matter. This translates into tensions and contradictions among groups that promote digital play to older adults, but also between these groups and older players themselves. Older adults have a fraught relationship with a discourse that admittedly legitimates their play but also frames them as old, declining, and in need of supervision.

I argue that the silver gamer discourse, although pervasive and influential, causes tensions and encounters resistance that in turn shape older adults’ video game play. Surrounded by actors who claim more expertise on older adults’ digital play than older adults themselves, older players resort to quiet non-compliance or disengagement to circumvent its constraints.

The chapter explores the issue of power and resistance in older adults’ video game play from three angles. It examines the negotiations and controversies that arise when actors attempt to

⁸⁸The project has undergone a significant scaling-up in 2018-2019, where workshops were implemented in 11 new *départements* and 4 new *régions* in France, extending *Golden-Age Games* beyond the confines of its region of origin.

implement the silver gamer discourse, taking the *Golden-Age Games* project as an example (3.1.). It then considers the tense relationship between older players and the silver gamer discourse in light of its similarity with the successful aging discourse (3.2.). It concludes with the analysis of a particularly fraught form of play: older adults' digital play in aged care institutions (3.3.).

3.1. The Politics Of The Silver Gamer

Actors involved in the promotion of video games for older adults are not a homogeneous crowd. Their divergences in the way they conceptualize aging, implement projects, or measure success complicate the silver gamer discourse. This subsection focuses on the connections and tensions among silver gamer advocates. A case study of the *Golden-Age Games* project, its network of allies, and its position within different fields sheds light on the politics of the silver gamer discourse.

A Heterogeneous Collective of Actors

The *Golden-Age Games* project relies on the cooperation of an assortment of employees, partners, and audiences under a politically and geographically decentralized model in a context of accelerated growth. While *Golden-Age Games* presents a united front to outside observers, the collective brings together actors who have different perspectives, backgrounds, and objectives. Such divergences are not necessarily a threat to the project, as they allow for discursive flexibility which benefits *Golden-Age Games* in its search for new allies and resources. But they open up cracks in the silver gamer discourse and complicate its implementation. As an introduction to the analysis of *Golden-Age Games*, I map its actors and their position in the project.

At the core of *Golden-Age Games*, five groups are directly involved in its activities: the association's board of directors, the civic service provider's national managers and local coordinators, host institutions' staff, volunteers, and older adults who participate in *Golden-Age Games* events. The project depends on their implication and cooperation on the ground. The association and its board of directors constitute the heart of the *Golden-Age Games* network. The founders of *Golden-Age Games* include a telecommunications provider, the foundation of an insurance company, a civic service provider, and the local Departmental Council, among others. The collective founded in 2014 and turned association in 2018 is led by a board of directors who represent the founding partners that are still active in the project. A full-time employee is in charge of finances, project development, and the supervision of *Golden-Age Games* actions (including workshops and competitions). The board of directors makes decisions regarding the project's strategy and communication.

The civic service provider's local coordinators are a central node within the *Golden-Age Games* network. The civic service provider that sits on *Golden-Age Games*' board of directors has a network of local branches in many of the major and midsize cities of continental France. A number of those local branches include *Golden-Age Games* among their missions. Local coordinators are in charge of making the *Golden-Age Games* workshops happen; they hire volunteers, set up partnerships with host institutions, teach volunteers how to facilitate video

game workshops, report to the national office, and sometimes facilitate workshops alongside volunteers. Coordinators are intermediaries and brokers in the network: they connect host institutions (which they solicit and sign up for workshops), volunteers (whom they hire and supervise), and the civic service provider (whose national coordinators they report to). Organizers integrate the *Golden-Age Games* project within a local network of host institutions, local authorities, and intermediaries. Coordinators also work toward increasing the visibility of the project, especially in the media. In one branch, for instance, the civic service provider hosts a local radio show where volunteers present their missions, including the workshops, to promote civic service and *Golden-Age Games*.

In host institutions, there is often at least one member of the staff who attends the workshops. Most care homes employ someone to set up leisure activities for residents. These leisure supervisors (“*animateurs*”) are a primary contact for volunteers and their coordinators as they oversee the workshops’ planning. Leisure coordinators regularly attend and co-facilitate workshops. Other members of the staff occasionally contribute nurses and care attendants, maintenance workers, and other medical professionals. In institutions such as neighbourhood centres and municipal leisure centres, volunteers generally work on their own and coordinators are in charge of interacting with someone within the institution.

The volunteers who coordinate *Golden-Age Games* workshops and local competitions are young adults tasked with a set of public interest missions (including but not limited to *Golden-Age Games*⁸⁹). The civic service provider’s local coordinators hire new volunteers every September on eight-month contracts (on average), dispatch them into small groups, and assign several missions to each group. Volunteers divide their time between facilitating workshops, preparing them, and receiving feedback on *Golden-Age Games* events (notwithstanding the time spent on other missions).

Participants are, in a general sense, older adults who attend the *Golden-Age Games* workshops and competitions. The term “participant” includes various types of involvement: regulars, occasional players, audience members, people in need of technical assistance, *etc.* That said, the category makes sense for organizers who use it to evaluate the scope and success of their work. It lumps together all the initiative’s beneficiaries, to use a word commonly used among coordinators who were trained as social workers. The category of “participants” is nonetheless problematic because it suggests a relative uniformity among workshop attendants, even though they have diverse profiles and relationships with *Golden-Age Games*. The difference between participants and non-participants is quite precarious at times. Some people arrive very late or leave very early; some gravitate around the workshop but refuse to play or even sit down; and others stop to watch for a minute and then leave. All are involved in the workshops in some way, but not all of them would describe themselves as participants, and volunteers are often uncertain of who counts as a participant. Furthermore, older adults who attend *Golden-Age*

⁸⁹Other missions include facilitating workshops about environmental issues in middle schools, helping older adults with their errands, setting up movie/debate clubs, maintaining community gardens, *etc.*

Games events are not a uniform group. Just like coordinators, volunteers, and administrators have different and sometimes overlapping roles within *Golden-Age Games*, participants have various modes of intervention and presence in the workshops. Some play video games; others take over from shy volunteers and facilitate the workshops; others still provide care for distraught residents who wandered into the space of the workshop; others still just sit back and chat. Nonetheless, even though the category of “participants” has its shortcomings, I continue to use it in order to reflect the fault line that divides workshops in terms of status and authority, as well as social actors’ own classifications.

These five core groups do not necessarily interact with each other. The association’s administrators mostly work with the civic service provider’s national managers and occasionally with some local coordinators, but they seldom meet with participants or volunteers except during regional competitions, and they rarely visit workshops. Volunteers and participants see a lot of each other. Local coordinators and host institutions’ staff have various levels of involvement in the workshops, sometimes attending every one of them and sometimes coming by once every few months. The civic service provider’s national managers and local coordinators work together, and *Golden-Age Games* is only one of their missions. In sum, the interactions between these different groups are asymmetrical, and the most authoritative actors are not necessarily the most central ones in the network.

In addition to these five core groups, the *Golden-Age Games* network includes partners and allies that are removed from the implementation of the project but whose support is critical for its success. The network branches out in various directions, connecting the project with local politicians, senior officials, social workers, public agency representatives, and so on. These actors are less visible than those who represent the association or organize its events, but they come to the foreground on occasion, particularly during competitions:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] The leisure supervisor tells me that yesterday’s competition was a success: several important people came by, including the city’s deputy mayor in charge of leisure activity and the coordinator for the county’s social welfare centres. Today, the mayor announced that the city would buy Wii consoles for all its *résidences-autonomie*. The leisure supervisor tells me that they had asked for consoles years ago, but at the time, the mayor wasn’t convinced that video games were a good fit for nursing homes.

The local coordinators later told me that this was not necessarily good news for *Golden-Age Games*, because *résidences-autonomie* were not going to renew their partnership with the association if they already had their own consoles. The relationship between *Golden-Age Games* actors and their partners is indeed complex: the association needs host institutions, sources of funding, and allies in the promotion of video games for seniors, but these partners have the potential to become competitors.

Internal Hierarchies

The social actors and groups involved in the *Golden-Age Games* project have complex and sometimes adverse relationships. The main fault line is the one between participants (older adults who attend the workshop in the most general sense of the word) and organizers (all those who have some sort of decision-making power over older adults' play in the project). Although interactions and dynamics vary from one workshop to another, there is one constant: the power differential between participants and nearly everyone else. Older adults who attend *Golden-Age Games* workshops have little control over their experience as it is the other people involved in the workshops (volunteers, nurses, coordinators, etc.) who are tasked with supervising their play.

Still, the creation of categories and "human kinds", to borrow Hacking's (1995) phrase, tends to flatten and oversimplify the social world. Therefore, I am careful to acknowledge that the categories of organizers and participants are neither entirely clear-cut nor staunchly antagonistic. For instance, some participants manage to become quite influential in their workshops (and sometimes beyond) either because of their established status in the host institution or because of their importance in the project. Participants who have won regional tournaments obtain a kind of legitimacy that allows them to directly address the association's board of directors or formulate requests and opinions, although organizers may frown at what they consider to be an entitled attitude. The power distribution in the *Golden-Age Games* project undergoes frequent reconfigurations, as its shifting internal hierarchy illustrates. Yet these roles matter insofar as they implement asymmetric relations in the daily conduct of the workshops. It is the case even when participants and volunteers perform each other's roles, for instance when volunteers play alongside participants or participants direct the workshops while volunteers sit quietly in the back.

The *Golden-Age Games* project structures various groups into a network where some actors are under the authority of others. Depending on their affiliation (with the association, the civic service provider, or the institutions), organizers have a different amount and type of authority within the project. The association's board of directors has the most authority over the project's design and development, but they must report to funding bodies and partners to keep the project going. They have limited visibility regarding what happens during the workshops and limited control over the implementation of their concept. Members of the board have chosen to embrace rather than combat this situation and give considerable leeway to local organizers who set up the workshops in the field.

On the side of the civic service provider, the chain of command is established independently of the *Golden-Age Games* project itself. National managers oversee the work of local coordinators who themselves supervise volunteers. National managers connect *Golden-Age Games* administrators and local coordinators, making sure that the latter follow the expectations set by the former. The relationship between the association's board of directors and local coordinators is ambivalent: coordinators answer to board members, but board members' authority is indirect,

weakened by the fact that they are not the coordinators' employers, and limited insofar as *Golden-Age Games* workshops are only one of the many projects coordinators supervise. Local coordinators regard administrators as colleagues who impose constraints upon their work. They cite among other things the taxing reports that have to be completed and forwarded every month, the lack of funds or guidance to procure the workshops' Wii consoles, and the age limit to participate in regional competitions (several coordinators and leisure supervisors find themselves unable to enrol their best players because they are under 65). In practice, coordinators divide their time between working with project partners (leisure supervisors and other staff from host institutions, in the case of *Golden-Age Games* workshops) and training volunteers.

Volunteers occupy a position subordinate to nearly all other organizers and sometimes even to participants. The uncertain status of civic service places volunteers in an ambiguous position of low-paid service workers who are generously dedicating their time and energy to a charitable cause while training to acquire desirable skills for the job market. To local coordinators, volunteers are the recipients of a service: they get to acquire job experience and training while receiving a salary. To host institutions' staff, volunteers are treated like interns and often work alongside the institutions' trainees during workshops. Both coordinators and staff act as bosses toward volunteers:

[field notes from a conversation with volunteers] The volunteers tell me that they have beef with an *EHPAD*'s administrative assistant. She works at the front desk and is not invested in the workshops, but she regularly comes by to check on the volunteers and make sure they work. When she finds them sitting down and chatting, she assumes that they are slacking off and chastises them in front of everyone. Volunteers dislike her and find her surveillance insulting. One volunteer notes that, since they're not paid by the *EHPAD*, its staff really doesn't have a say in how they conduct workshops. But they don't plan on confronting the assistant and joke about the fact that they are afraid of her.

To volunteers, coordinators are teacher-like bosses for a job that doesn't pay nearly enough. But they also colleagues who have to deal with the same uncooperative participants, demanding higher-ups, and fussy staff. Within institutions, participants and volunteers often demonstrate a sense of solidarity when they face the staff's demands and expectations. Overall, volunteers express varying levels of commitment to their low-paying and low-prestige jobs, particularly when they do not get to choose which missions they perform. When a volunteer sits and chats with me during a workshop, another volunteer asks him to come over and help her with participants; he does not move and tells her: "I'll be paid just the same anyway!" Volunteers stand out among *Golden-Age Games* actors for their relative disinterest in the silver gamer discourse.

A Flexible Discourse

Several narratives coexist within the *Golden-Age Games* project. Depending on the context, its promoters frame the project as a successful aging program, an initiative for digital literacy in old age, or an esports circuit for older adults, with occasional forays into other fields (such as arts and culture or technological innovation). Thanks to the *Golden-Age Games* project's versatility, the association has managed to establish partnerships in various fields: video game companies, e-sports events, tech start-ups, initiatives that aim to assist older adults, specialized media, *etc.* This inscription in several fields and narratives at once strengthens *Golden-Age Games*. It facilitates its actors' access to material and political support from a wide range of actors, from game companies to departmental councils.

It is in part because of its economic model that the *Golden-Age Games* project is constantly on the lookout for new allies. The continued existence of *Golden-Age Games* depends on three elements: a partnership with a foundation, local subsidies and grants, and civic service. The civic service scheme enables *Golden-Age Games* to greatly reduce its operational costs, as it exempts employers from paying non-wage labour costs, but the project still has expenses. Local coordinators struggle to secure the resources necessary to run workshops. Basic resources include a place where workshops and eventually competitions can be held (ideally: heated, with electricity, tables, and Wi-Fi); support from influential local actors (for instance elected officials or institutional representatives who might otherwise ostracize the initiative); visibility for the project (an article in the local newspaper, flyers in places patronized by potential participants, or a note in a municipal activity guide for seniors). The association needs a permanent employee to supervise the deployment of the workshops, money to buy the consoles, tablets, and games for the workshops, resources to organize competitions, and investments to set up experiments and prepare for future projects. On that front, the association's resources largely come from its partnership with a grant-making foundation. But the partnership is re-negotiated every few years and the foundation does not guarantee its long-term presence. The association thus scrambles to diversify its assets while situating its project as a flagship for the foundation (whose representative incidentally served as the association's president for a time). Other founding partners occasionally provide material resources; for instance, some of the consoles come from an association that recycles electronics.

An irregular but important source of funding for the *Golden-Age Games* project is the bevy of subsidies granted by regional and departmental Councils to encourage social and technological innovation in their territories. However, local grants generally cannot be obtained several years in a row as they focus on kick-starting innovative projects. In practice, this means that each local branch has access to a different budget and that this budget fluctuates over time. Coordinators are sometimes left to improvise to procure the machines and games needed for the workshops. They have to find consoles and tablets on their meagre budget or negotiate with local sponsors and partners to obtain them. Coordinators sometimes solve this issue by bringing in their own consoles or buying used consoles from volunteers at very low prices. Overall, the *Golden-Age Games* project juggles several precarious sources of funding, and its financial balance is a recurring preoccupation for the board of directors.

In order to manage the project's rapid growth in a context of financial instability, organizers at the national and local scales are intent on recruiting allies. The *Golden-Age Games* association adapts its sales talk to its potential backers: the workshops are alternatively about public health, the fight against social isolation, digital literacy, the promotion of e-sports (which certain regions have identified as a policy priority because of the economic opportunities and good PR it represents), or the dynamism of local communities. Administrators adjust their arguments to their interlocutors. When they interact with a gerontechnology firm, they focus on health-related silver technology; with the civic service provider, they use the language of social work and solidarity; with a national association that represents video game editors, they emphasize the positive effects and cultural value of video games; and with the regional video convention or the local university's research team, they prioritize esports.

The *Golden-Age Games* project is designed to be flexible. The association's mission statement is broad enough to allow *Golden-Age Games* coordinators to adapt the project to their local context. The association's Charter sets conditions for participation that keep the project open to a variety of institutions and formats. To take part, a host institution has to commit to three actions: participating in the end-of-year local competitions, providing feedback to the association (by filling monthly spreadsheets), and having an inter-generational aspect. The phrasing of these obligations is vague and open to interpretation, and there are no oversight or evaluation procedures in place. This malleability is amplified by the decentralized system that gives significant decision-making power to coordinators and local partners. In practice, local coordinators rarely cross paths with each other or with the association's administrators. They are encouraged to adapt workshops to their local partners' needs and expectations, with the caveat that workshops should feature at least some *Wii Sports* play and host institutions should agree to participate in local competitions.

Figuring Out The Silver Gamer: Debates And Divergences

In addition to its strategic role in the recruitment of potential allies and supports, the *Golden-Age Games* project's flexibility accommodates its actors' various perspectives on older adults' digital play. Actors involved in implementing and promoting the project have different perspectives on the respective importance of digital literacy, e-sports, or health maintenance in *Golden-Age Games* events. Some fully subscribe to the successful aging paradigm while others are more invested in helping older adults become skilled digital users or diversifying the esports scene. Actors' professional backgrounds and political beliefs shape their outlook on the project: social workers in the civic service scheme are preoccupied with volunteers' wellbeing and training; medical staff tends to be particularly interested in the therapeutic potential of the workshops; video game companies and conventions welcome the project's effort to make video games more inclusive; local politicians and senior officials look to *Golden-Age Games* as an opportunity to supplement aged care networks and policies. Many narratives converge in *Golden-Age Games* in a way that brings together unlikely allies but also creates constant

negotiations and occasional contradictions. *Golden-Age Games*' adjustable identity is a source of challenge as well as a strategic asset.

The first source of divergence concerns the status of the *Golden-Age Games* project in the market of aged care and leisure. Actors relate to one of three models: the project as public service, private enterprise, and philanthropy. The public service model is often adopted by local coordinators and other actors connected to the civic service provider. The latter has its origins in the popular education movement (“*éducation populaire*”) and many of its employees have trained and worked as social workers in the past. When coordinators come from the private sector, however, they generally understand the workshops in terms of philanthropy and charity. A similar divide exists among host institutions' staff. When the *EHPAD* or *résidence-autonomie* is publicly funded, its leisure supervisors and caregivers are more likely to consider the workshops to be a form of public service; when the institution is privately owned, the staff sees *Golden-Age Games* as a charity. The board of directors, whose members are representatives of companies and private foundations, tend to envision the project as a private initiative that has the potential to become a consumer product.

As different understandings of the project stem from each model, this constitutes an unspoken source of divergence for organizers. It leads to disagreements about the most appropriate business model for the project, for instance, whether host institutions should pay for the workshops or whether the project should attempt to make profits. It also questions the type of partnerships that the project should prioritize, especially along the public/private divide. Coordinators who see the project as a form of public service prefer not to partner with privately owned *EHPAD* or religious institutions, for instance. A coordinator explains that she gives priority to public *EHPAD* because she sees the workshops as a form of public service insofar as they could not exist without civic service, a system largely funded by the state. The coordinator feels that spending tax money on private and for-profit institutions would be inappropriate. On the other hand of the spectrum, a collaborator of the association argues that host institutions should be charged, even if only with a symbolic fee, in order to reflect the value of the service provided to them. The public/private debate echoes the reconfiguration of public service and the welfare state in the field of aging and care (Argoud 2016).

The second point of contention among *Golden-Age Games* actors relates to video games, their purported benefits and dangers. Some organizers regard video games as nothing more than a gimmick if not a potentially dangerous object that ought to be treated with caution. A representative of one of the association's partners quips “I wouldn't want super-online seniors”, adding that human relations are more valuable than digital technology. Anxieties about video games and specifically addiction are frequent, even among organizers who are themselves players. Nevertheless, the techno-enthusiastic perspective is dominant among organizers. Many see digital technology as an opportunity to enhance older adults' lives, including their sense of self-worth, social connection, and digital literacy. Even then, organizers have sometimes very different outlooks on the specific benefits and respective values of video games, computers, or the Internet. To some, video games are less desirable than other activities such as learning how

to use one's phone or making video calls, while others believe video games to have exceptional benefits that other devices cannot offer. The blanket term "digital technology" used in the promotion of the project flattens these divergences, but only to an extent. Most organizers assume that video games (particularly the type of video game play that *Golden-Age Games* workshops offer) have health benefits. Some consider health to be the main focus of the project, especially among organizers who are over fifty or have a background in social and medical professions. But many organizers treat health as a secondary (albeit welcome) aspect of video game play. They perceive video games to be a valuable activity first and foremost because it introduces older adults to digital technology. Some organizers are uncomfortable with their colleagues' emphasis on health because they find it restrictive and stigmatizing for both older adults and video game players. It is particularly the case when host institution staff are themselves interested in technology and find intrinsic value in it, as is the case for a leisure supervisor who describes himself as a "geek" and has set up a website with a press review and various games for residents. As for organizers who come from the video game industry, health matters are an afterthought. They see *Golden-Age Games* participants first and foremost as esports players that bring diversity to the field and demonstrate that video games are harmless fun.

Strategies, Networks, and Fields

The *Golden-Age Games* project is connected to several fields at once. I draw here on Bourdieu's description of fields as social spaces that are characterized by an internal logic and relative autonomy, a network of actors engaged in interactions and power relations, and an ongoing struggle over the hierarchy and boundaries of the space (Bourdieu 1992; Martin 2003). The concept of field echoes what *Golden-Age Games* actors and decision-makers refer to as "ecosystems". For instance, administrators encourage local coordinators to collaborate with local gaming and tech conventions when they set up *Golden-Age Games* competitions as a way to get a foothold in the video game ecosystem. Elsewhere, two local coordinators mention that the aged care ecosystem is powerful and well-funded in their region, so they prioritize *Golden-Age Games* and other civic service missions dedicated to older adults.

The position of *Golden-Age Games* halfway between the fields of aged care, digital literacy, and video games is typical of projects concerning technology and old age. Wanka and Gallistl (2018:7) note that technologies designed for or offered to older adults is in "a hybrid between the field of technology and the field of old age." This intermediate field combines an emphasis on innovation and technological solutions with a preoccupation for a population understood as dependent and in need of intervention. It constitutes "an arena in which power relations between different agents (e.g., businesses, seniors' organizations and technicians) are continuously negotiated, social positions are distributed and fought out." (p. 8) These agents reconfigure the way in which old age is done (through technology and other practices), disciplined, and valued. Wanka and Gallistl illustrate their argument with the case study of a project whose actors are developing an exergame for older adults. They affiliate their project with the Active and

Assisted Living ecosystem in which logics of innovation, care, successful aging, scientific research, and economic profit coexist. The groups involved in the project (engineers, NGO representatives, sociologists, older test users, caregivers) have different and often competing objectives and understandings of old age. The project's actors fought over who was the most legitimate representative for "real" older adults, a struggle finally won by end-user organizations (such as NGOs) because they were in charge of recruiting test users, a process through which they imposed their priorities. The exergame project described by Wanka and Gallistl differs in several ways from *Golden-Age Games*, but it emphasizes that the internal politics of such initiatives matter insofar as they indirectly shape older adults' experience.

Golden-Age Games local coordinators strategically position the workshops in order to answer the expectations of influential actors in their city or *département*. It proves challenging for organizers to set up workshops if they do not have the support of prominent local actors. In a city, the coordinator cannot set up the workshops in any of the city's seven *résidences-autonomie* because the manager who oversees them for the CCAS "does not see the point" of video games for older adults, according to the local coordinator. The inscription of *Golden-Age Games* into a field provides its actors with specific resources, but at a cost. In exchange for material and political support, *Golden-Age Games* actors have to adapt their interventions to their allies' expectations, and the project is occasionally embroiled in conflicts between local actors:

[field notes from a conversation with a local coordinator] The coordinator explains to me that it was a big deal to have someone from the municipal team attend the local competition. There have been *Golden-Age Games* workshops in this city since the project's early days, but they never managed to partner with the city's EHPADs and had to fall back on privately owned *résidences-autonomie* in the suburbs of the city. The problem is that the city has worked for decades with a civic service provider who is a direct competitor for *Golden-Age Games*' civic service provider; out of loyalty, municipal employees (including CCAS employees who make decisions regarding EHPADs) have always refused to host *Golden-Age Games*. But the situation has changed: given *Golden-Age Games*' success and media coverage, the municipal team wants the association to participate in events that promote the city. The coordinator tells me that local officials from the CCAS have made overtures to *Golden-Age Games* and that the project will be hosted in the city's EHPADs next year. He invited people from the municipal team to make the opening speech of this year's competition to celebrate the reconciliation.

There is a strategic aspect to coordinators' decisions regarding host institutions. Organizers reach out to institutions in order to convince them to host workshops and then select those that are most suitable for the project. During the setup of the project in a new city, organizers have to overcome the wariness of institutions whose decision-makers are unconvinced by the project, unfamiliar with civic service, insufficiently equipped for the workshops, unwilling to let unsupervised teenagers in charge, or critical toward video games. A coordinator told me that

she struggled to convince senior clubs, particularly clubs that are managed by seniors. In one case, the club president refused because he was convinced that volunteers were hoodlums and high school dropouts who would disrupt the peaceful atmosphere of the club. That said, *Golden-Age Games* workshops are in high demand and local coordinators usually get to choose which host institutions they collaborate with, especially after the first year.

Golden-Age Games actors draw on their personal networks to secure the position of the project in a field. Interpersonal relationships play an important role in the implementation of the *Golden-Age Games* project:

[field notes from a conversation with a coordinator] The coordinator tells me that she has a good relationship with the person in charge of civic service in the Departmental Council. The coordinator turns to her when she needs things like booking the municipal hall for a competition. The coordinator has also called on contacts made during her previous career as a leisure supervisor. To set up the project in her city, she called an acquaintance who works at city hall who helped her get in touch with the *CCAS* supervisor. That paved the way for a partnership between the city and *Golden-Age Games*.

When organizers define the workshop primarily as a service for the elderly, they inscribe the workshop into the field of aged care. They prioritize aged care residential institutions such as *EHPADs* and *résidences-autonomie* as host institutions. They get in touch with public agencies like the *CCAS* and often collaborate with municipalities and regional or departmental councils. Organizers occasionally partner with actors from the private sector such as companies or charitable organizations that provide care services and social work for the elderly. They also set up gateways between the workshops and other projects that they supervise through civic service, such as a service provided by volunteers who make weekly visits to isolated seniors or accompany older adults with mobility issues on their errands. When it proves strategically sound to situate the project within the field of aged care, *Golden-Age Games* actors rally around a narrative that emphasizes successful aging, health benefits, and inter-generational relationships. Video games, play, and competition become secondary features of the project. This contextualizes organizers' choice to occasionally forgo digital activities in favour of playing physical board games or singing karaoke.

The field of aged care is attractive for *Golden-Age Games* insofar as it is relatively well-funded, particularly on the local scale. Despite a long-term tendency toward the reduction of public funding, France is still a welfare state with an ample network of local institutions and public services. Successive governments have mandated ambitious public schemes in response to population aging. These national schemes are often implemented *via* subcontractors in the private sectors and funded by regional or departmental governments rather than the State itself. This complicates but also diversifies the resources available to actors in the field of aged care. Local and national organizers get a significant part of their funding from local authorities and private foundations that have budgets dedicated to aged care. A coordinator notes that she was

able to set up nine workshops in her city because the national funding body for aging-related initiatives supports the project, particularly in rural areas. The field of aged care is also particularly accessible for *Golden-Age Games* because many organizers are or were social workers in aged care:

[field notes from a conversation with a local coordinator] Before joining the civic service provider, the coordinator worked at the local *CLIC*, a local public service that informs older adults about their rights and available services. When the coordinator started to set up the workshops, she contacted former *CLIC* colleagues and acquaintances. She asked them which institutions would be interested to host this kind of project. She asked her former colleagues to advertise the workshops to the aged care institutions they were in touch with.

Golden-Age Games actors can go another route and integrate the workshops into the field of digital literacy. The promotion of digital literacy brings together actors who identify digital illiteracy, defined as an insufficient mastery of the skills needed to comfortably access online spaces and services, as a matter of public interest. They work toward ensuring that underprivileged groups can use digital technology well enough that they do not lose access to the job market or administrative services (George 2004). In contrast with the ecosystem of age care, the network of actors engaged in the promotion of digital literacy is mostly composed of associations and private-sector initiatives. It includes philanthropic foundations funded by banks or telecommunications companies, local charitable organizations, and silver economy and gerontechnology start-ups. The topic emerged as a matter of public interest in the 2000s, at a time when the State had already started to disengage from large-scale standardized infrastructure and delegate its responsibilities to local authorities and the private sector. Municipalities and public administrations are almost absent from this ecosystem, which draws on the techno-enthusiastic ideal of the “start-up nation”, a phrase popularized by a former Minister of Economy.

The *Golden-Age Games* model is particularly well-suited for this ecosystem. In line with the expectations of a field that values innovation and flexibility, the *Golden-Age Games* project functions with project-based renewable partnerships that request minimal financial investment and no long-term commitment from funding bodies. When organizers situate the project within the digital literacy ecosystem, video games become the main selling point and the focus of the workshops. Organizers focus on participants’ in-game performance and progress in handling digital devices. Play is not treated as a pretense, but as a means to an end: helping older adults to become familiar and acquire new skills with digital devices. Organizers often let participants bring their own machines to ask volunteers for demonstrations and advice. They also prefer host institutions such as neighbourhood cultural centres or senior clubs rather than *EHPADs* and *résidences-autonomie*.

The *Golden-Age Games* project is also embedded in the field of video games, although at its periphery. *Golden-Age Games* actors (and particularly its administrators) have managed to get

their project recognized as an esports initiative by representatives of video game companies and gaming conventions. They create relationships with companies through experiments and tests with new consoles and games or demonstrations and competitions during industry events. A video game convention located in the project's native region has participated in the project since its inception and was later joined by two major video game publishers and one of the national professional unions for video game companies. Board members set up partnerships with e-sports institutions and actors, including a research group that studies e-sports from a medical perspective.

The *Golden-Age Games* is embedded in different fields depending on actors' perspectives and local circumstances. This partly determines where workshops are set up (in nursing homes, senior clubs, or neighbourhood centres; in new host institutions, or in institutions that are already involved), what activities are offered (Wii bowling, other forms of play, technical support, *etc.*), and what kind of participants organizers try to recruit (advertising the workshops within aged care institutions, through the local *Centres for the Coordination of Social Action*, in bakeries and local libraries, *etc.*). In that sense, local networks and politics have concrete implications for older adults who attend the workshops. Their access to and experience of play are shaped by the choices and tensions among actors who organize *Golden-Age Games* events.

The Silver Gamer In Local Politics

Coordinators' access to resources and partnerships depends in large part on the territory on which they operate. Each coordinator is attached to a local branch of the civic service provider whose network covers all of mainland France. A close-up of the thirty workshops visited during the fieldwork illustrates that the project is implemented in very different spaces. Among the 18 cities in 6 (of 12) regions, the size of the cities ranges from 15,000 to more than 150,000 inhabitants. The sample includes former industrial centres, large student cities, rural towns embedded in an agricultural hinterland, residential suburbs, small mountain towns, *etc.* Each context offers specific resources and challenges to coordinators in the process of setting up workshops. The civic service provider and association work together to determine where to open workshops, taking into consideration factors such as available grants or existing relationships with local officials.

Local politics play a decisive role in the establishment of workshops. The implementation of a workshop is shaped by elected officials' programs and campaign promises, existing infrastructures and networks, and interpersonal relationships with local decision-makers. In one case, the civic service provider has signed a convention with the municipality. Local coordinators have a close relationship with the municipal team, and they implement the civic service provider's projects (including *Golden-Age Games*) together. The coordinators align the projects with municipal priorities and in exchange obtain material and symbolic resources from city hall. These include access to several municipal buildings to set up the workshops and competitions, the participation of the city hall's "digital specialist" in workshops, and in some

cases jobs for former volunteers. The partnership with an association dedicated to rural areas provides another example of the interaction between the workshops and local politics. The *Golden-Age Games* association had contacted the national funding body for aging-related initiatives who had agreed to provide funding on the condition that *Golden-Age Games* set up more workshops in rural areas. *Golden-Age Games* and the national funding body thus called upon the national confederation of rural associations. The latter agreed to partner with the *Golden-Age Games* project and set them up with a regional branch of the confederation. In this case, the project is embedded not only in local politics but also in national policy directives.

Workshops take place in one of two contexts: aged care institutions, including *EHPADs* and *résidences-autonomie* where participants are recruited among residents; or contexts such as senior clubs and neighbourhood centres where participants only come for the duration of the workshop. The typical host institution is an *EHPAD*, generally a public institution with a limited budget and middle-to-working-class residents. That pattern is an object of both preoccupation and pride for the board of directors and organizers in general. It contributes to the economic fragility of the project which cannot count on its host institutions to provide any material or financial support. The board of directors had to bury a proposal that would have seen the free service become a paid-subscription deal because nearly all of its users would have been unable to participate. But the presence of a large number of *EHPADs* among host institutions also means that *Golden-Age Games* manages to reach a disenfranchised population that most digital literacy initiatives fail to address. The association indeed prides itself on offering video game workshops to people other than the dynamic, able-bodied, metropolitan sixty-year-old who are the prime audience of many digital-related projects.

The marginalization of nursing homes and their residents is materialized in their geographic location. They are in small cities or towns, far from the main metropolitan areas, and often situated on the margins of these already peripheral places, such as low-income suburbs built around public housing or in isolated rural areas. The practical aspects of the fieldwork drew my attention to the marginality of the spaces I visited. I do not drive; as a result, for four months, I took a train from Paris to the city where I was scheduled to visit workshops, and from there I walked, took the bus, or hitched a ride with organizers to reach the workshops. Organizers were helpful but rarely had the time to drive me around, and local public transportation networks were not always dependable. As a result, I spent a lot of time walking around unfamiliar cities, following the directions I scribbled on a piece of paper to make up for my very old phone's unreliable battery. The hikes from the train station situated in a busy city centre to the distant, sleepy, and sometimes rundown residential neighbourhoods where workshops took place concretely manifested the status of aged care institutions, relegated to the margins of urban space. This resonates with the geographic situation of the civic service provider's local branches, also situated in peripheral areas of the city, and volunteers themselves, who often live on its outskirts. This is compounded by the fact that a significant number of volunteers either cannot drive or cannot afford a car or fuel. Coordinators and volunteers spend a considerable amount of time and energy coordinating volunteers' journeys from their residence to the civic service

provider's local office and the host institutions, thus crisscrossing the geographical and social periphery.

3.2. A Lukewarm Reception: Older Adults And The Silver Gamer

In addition to the divergences among its proponents, the silver gamer discourse is unsettled by older adults' mixed reactions and relative lack of interest in its promises. Older adults are not hostile toward the notions that underpin the silver gamer discourse, but they are ambivalent. Older adults' uneasiness with the silver gamer discourse reflects their complex relationship with successful aging and the importance of health in defining (successful) old age, the purported benefits of digital technology and video games, or the imperative to remain active and busy in old age. Faced with complex expectations, older adults sometimes comply and attempt to meet them, but they also distance themselves and even contest these norms. As for the silver gamer, it has little resonance with older adults who play video games, although they occasionally draw on its arguments to justify their play.

Negotiable Discourses

As a complement to the previous chapter's overview of discourse as a sociological concept, this subsection addresses the matter of individuals' relationship with discourses. Discourses (in this case, productive narratives on digital technology and aging) shape the social world by attributing positive and negative meanings to objects or behaviours, making some scenarios more readily imaginable than others, or generating support for certain causes. This translates into practical implications, particularly in terms of public funding, legal provisions, or media coverage. But discourses are not all-powerful or deterministic. While social actors can hardly ignore the discursive context in which they operate, they may implement a discourse in various ways and even contest it. In general, the exercise of power involves neither a straightforward conversion of discourses into results nor a binary opposition between those who believe and those who resist (Foucault 1975). Although structures of oppression exist in a lasting manner, power is messy, viscous, and never static. The conceptualization of power as fundamentally strategic allows for a close reading of subjects' ambivalent relationships with the injunctions, norms, and expectations that pervade their everyday life. In Foucault's ([1975] 1991:27) words,

this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.

Firstly, there is no fundamental division between individuals who wield discursive power and individuals who are subjected to it. Social actors relate to discourses in complex ways, negotiating but also producing and reinforcing them. Secondly, individuals do not engage with norms and narratives along a binary of compliance vs. resistance. Rather than straightforwardly and wholeheartedly implementing (or rejecting) discourses, they make do, employing tactics that allow them to maintain agency in a subaltern position (de Certeau 1980).

The relationship between individuals and technology constitutes a paradigmatic articulation of this disposition. Science & Technology Studies and related fields such as the sociology of uses (“*sociologie des usages*”) document how users appropriate technology through negotiation and adaptation in a spirit of constrained agency. “Indeed, the plasticity of uses does not appear to be infinite, and one identifies dominant applications that conform to prescribed uses” (Jouët 2000:502, my own translation). Technology acts as a black box of power that obfuscates the power relations at work in its design and uses: “It is in that sense that technical objects can be considered to be politically powerful instruments: as they produce specific modes of social organization, they naturalize, depoliticize, and confer another meaning onto them” (Akrich 2010:218, my own translation). In sum, while individuals have limited control over their situation and cannot extract themselves from the material and discursive circumstances of their practice, they seize these circumstances in complex and resourceful ways.

Identity Management In Old Age

Older adults actively adapt their lives to the changes associated with aging, as classical gerontological theories illustrate. The theory of activity posits that aging individuals can compensate for lost social roles through the intensification of other roles and heightened levels of activity (Havighurst 1963). The competing theory of disengagement proposes that aging individuals may progressively abandon social roles to account for their diminishing amounts of energy (Cumming and Henry 1961). Continuity theory notes the priority given by aging individuals to a sense of continuity and familiarity that protects their identity and role within their social group (Atchley 1989). *Déprise*, a perspective that reworks earlier functionalist theories of old age, frames aging individuals as agents who work toward maintaining the coherence of their lives in the face of uncontrollable change (Barthe *et al.* 1990). Through *déprise*, older adults manage changes and losses by discontinuing certain practices and reinvesting others that fulfill a similar function or protect a sense of autonomy and continuity. Individuals aim to reconcile the tension between the social status of old age, depreciated and Otherized, and their conviction that aging has not fundamentally changed them. *Déprise* emphasizes both the strategic and the improvisational dimension of that work: “Like any social actor, older adults execute a variety of tactics (without assuming whether their practices are the result of intentional strategies or tweaked routines) to face the difficulties of everyday life” (Barthe *et al.* 1990:38, my own translation).

In order to navigate the unsettling experience of aging, individuals work toward creating an identity and a narrative of old age that they can comfortably inhabit. A fundamental challenge for aging individuals is the lack of desirability or value of the identity of “old person”. As a social process, aging is characterized by the marginalization of those deemed old in social interactions and collective decision-making. Balard’s (2013) informants pinpoint the moment they entered old age as the moment others start treating them as if they were sick or slow and stop listening to them in group conversations. Because old age is not a desirable identity, older adults tend to avoid objects and practices that situate them within this identity. The literature on

medical technology and elderly users is replete with illustrations of this phenomenon. Technology and particularly gerontechnology is undesirable to its intended users insofar as it identifies them as frail and at-risk (Lassen *et al.* 2015). It proves difficult to even find older users of medical and gerontechnology who acknowledge that they use it. In Lassen *et al.*'s study, a 70-year-old informant started an interview by stating that he does not use medical technology:

But an hour into the interview, he suddenly remembered his high blood pressure and the fact that he has a blood pressure monitor. [...] It turns out that he usually has trouble finding the monitor, as he rarely uses it. He explained that he sees it as an unpleasant reminder of frailty and disease; so it gets hidden away in a closet, and he prefers not to know his blood pressure numbers. (p. 13)

Older adults who participate in the design of gerontechnology as test users occupy a similarly paradoxical position: for older testers, gerontechnology is a great idea, “but obviously not for me” (Neven 2010).

Older adults engage in the strategic use of various resources, including discursive resources, to maintain a desirable identity. Mallon (2007) forges the concept of aging work (“*un travail de vieillissement*”) to describe the experience of nursing home residents, whose entry into an aged care institution definitely excludes them from ideals of successful aging and the third age. In the constrained world of the nursing home, older adults manage to adjust their identity and everyday life in ways that protect their autonomy, self-worth, and sense of personhood. Mallon uses the concept of *déprise* to highlight that older adults are agentive and strategic actors not only when they are comparatively young, in good health, and living independently, but also in the restrictive context of aged care institutions and the fourth age. *Déprise* is sometimes imposed from outside (for instance when one’s doctor forbids driving), but it is also strategic (for example when one abandons hiking and joins a walking group instead) and tactical (when one replaces holidays abroad with local outings to reassure one’s anxious children). Nursing home residents have a limited control over their environment and everyday life, but they work toward distancing themselves from devalued identities and maintaining a sense of continuity. In Mallon’s study, an older woman reclaims her previous role as a competent housekeeper by cleaning her room herself and forbidding nursing home staff from touching anything. Residents keep objects or habits for which they have no use (for instance their children’s house keys) because they signal a certain stability in their lives.

There are different ways to manage the burdensome identity of “old person”. Firstly, discourses that include at least partially positive perspectives on aging allow older adults to reclaim this identity. Repetti (2015) demonstrates that successful aging constitutes a model identity and a tool for older adults to distance themselves from the stigma of retirement, passivity, and dependency. Repetti notes that most older adults appropriate the representations and norms of successful aging, although in a fragmentary manner. They embrace the celebration of activity and busyness but not the injunction to remain socially useful (particularly through the provision of free childcare and volunteering). Their performance of an active old age is a way to obtain

an acknowledgement of their worth as retired individuals. Secondly, many older adults attempt to distance themselves from the category of “old people” for as long as possible. They position themselves in opposition to other, “truly old” people who fail to age properly, like Marhánková’s (2011) or Allain and Marshall’s (2017) informants. Thirdly, older adults redefine this problematic identity into a more desirable one. They associate old age with freedom, wisdom, or peace. However, it remains difficult to evade dominant conceptualizations of aging as decline.

Quiet Resistance? Older Adults And Successful Aging

Older adults’ complex relationship with successful aging sheds light on their rapport with the silver gamer discourse. This subsection complements the previous chapter’s study of the successful aging discourse’s resonance among older adults (*cf.* Chapter 2.3) by examining older adults’ objections to successful aging. It contextualizes the following section’s analysis of the silver gamer discourse’s reception among older players.

Older adults have an unstable and at times adverse relationship with the successful aging discourse. They relate to its representations and expectations in a variety of ways, embracing them, contesting them, or positioning themselves as willing but unable to comply with them. The critical literature on successful aging documents older adults’ ambivalence toward normative narratives of old age. There are older individuals who embrace successful aging. It is the case of several informants in Allain & Marshall’s (2017) study “Foucault Goes To The Gym”. Many of these gym-going young seniors, all belonging to the upper-middle class and in good health, agree with the premises of successful aging regarding the importance of personal responsibility and self-discipline. A couple of informants correct the interviewer when the latter uses the word “pressure” to describe expectations about healthy aging: “Carol stated, ‘I wouldn’t say pressure. I would say opportunity,’ and Malcolm echoed, ‘Opportunity!’” (p. 410). They are quick to criticize other older people for not taking proper care of themselves and letting themselves become dependent and sick. This stance is shared by the older adults who attend the senior centre studied by Marhánková (2011). For Marhánková’s informants, successful aging constitutes a way to distinguish themselves from the dreaded fourth age:

They often talked about the experience of aging in a very stereotypical and ageistic manner when speaking about this experience in general or when speaking about “other” elderly people. Activity in their case served to construct an idealised picture of positive old age that was personalised and seen as exceptional. (p. 26)

But such advocates of successful aging are still relatively rare insofar as few older adults are able to maintain the illusion that they control the pace at which they age. When the untenable promises of successful aging fall short, older adults distance themselves from its expectations and devise alternative narratives of old age (Pack *et al.* 2019).

For many older adults, successful aging is not merely unattainable but also fundamentally undesirable. While successful aging is a pervasive discourse, there are very few older adults who both agree with its premises and implement it in their lives. Van Dyk *et al.* (2013) identify three narratives of old age in media, marketing, and political discourse: retirement (celebrating old age as well-deserved rest), restlessness (valuing activity and freedom), and productive aging (urging older adults to remain useful and independent). The authors conducted interviews with older adults to assess the relevance of each discourse and found that all three narratives come up in interviewees' accounts. Interviewees are roughly divided in two groups, one in which the (mostly male and older) respondents aligned with the discourse of retirement, and another group in which the (mostly women in their sixties) respondents performed the restlessness discourse. As for productive aging, it is mentioned by a third of the sample, but those who perform it tend to reject its principles. Even individuals involved in time-consuming voluntary work are critical of the State's attempts to put retirees "back to work". By contrast, those who agree with the productive aging discourse usually do not implement it in their own lives.

Older adults' relationship with successful aging is ambivalent. Its perspective on aging is both demanding and quite bleak given that it posits (visible and normal) aging as inexorable decline and a moral failure. Yet it is the framework of reference in policymaking, marketing, and media and fictional depictions of old age, and as such it makes its way into older adults' daily life. Older adults manage the tension between successful aging and their experience in several ways. Some explicitly reject the expectations of successful aging, particularly norms about being productive and available to help others. The literature on successful aging and older adults shows that older adults are aware of the successful aging paradigm and its expectations, which many challenge at least in part. Even in the gym-going crowd of affluent seniors featured in Allain & Marshall's (2017:408) study, "[p]articipants expressed a contradictory and sometimes ambivalent relationship with new moral imperatives that state growing old successfully means being physically active". Alternatively, older adults who herald the successful aging discourse sometimes dispense with actually implementing it, as illustrated by the respondents of Craciun and Flick's (2015) evocatively titled study "I want to be 100 years old, but I smoke too much". *Golden-Age Games* participants similarly talk about what they should do (such as exercise more, train their memory, change their diet) but with no sense of urgency:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Two participants are waiting for their turn on the Wii and chatting. They are talking about how well their memory works. One of them says that it is necessary to train our memory, for instance with the exercise books supplied by the institution. The other one answers that she has no time to do that and she has got more important things to do. The first participant says that they don't have enough time to do this kind of work at the moment, but they really should get to it someday.

In response to the gerontological emphasis on staying busy in old age, older adults value an active lifestyle while keeping their distance with this "regime of self-disciplining in later life" (Katz 2000:144). They have a nuanced outlook on successful aging and its expectations, but

maintaining this position is “a struggle in a society where activity has become a panacea for the political woes of the declining welfare state and its management of so-called risky populations” (p. 147).

That said, older adults’ perspective on aging does not exclusively revolve around the successful aging paradigm. Older adults draw on alternative conceptualizations of old age to make sense of their experience and imagine a “good old age”. When research on old age includes the perspective of older adults themselves, the focus shifts from health maintenance and agelessness to matters of freedom, peace, and comfort. Older adults can value and prioritize freedom in old age, particularly freedom from work but also social norms (Pirhonen *et al.* 2016). They can also have a fatalistic and appeased perspective on aging as a natural and inevitable process of decline that one should accept rather than fight against (Jolanki 2000). My informant Martine exemplifies this attitude, for instance in a conversation with a cousin of the same age: “And well, that’s what happens when you get older, that’s how it is. That does matter, especially after what you’ve been through [a stroke], it’s normal, really.⁹⁰” Finally, older adults can prioritize comfort, as Loe’s (2010) research shows. The oldest among older adults express a desire “to establish lifelong continuity, to create an enabling living space, to protect autonomy while also asking for help, to seek opportunities for human contact, and to prioritize comfort” (p. 257). Their technology uses show that, for older adults, aging is successful when it fosters comfort and peace in social interactions, intellectual engagements, and physical well-being (Loe, 2011).

The grip of successful aging softens in certain circumstances, particularly in very old age. Balard (2013) has studied the experience of nonagenarians and centenarians and identified a distinct understanding of old age that emerges after individuals have renounced the hope to age successfully. Once older adults enter the fourth age, they inhabit old age differently, and one of the possible outcomes is “good old age” (“*bonne vieillesse*”). In that case, very old people stop worrying about physical and cognitive integrity (“All that, you know, it doesn't matter anymore”) and instead focus on remembering the past. Balard highlights the agency of aging individuals who adapt to circumstances to inhabit the most appropriate and desirable identity that is available to them. Alternatively, older adults sometimes intentionally subvert old age. A prime illustration and well-documented case is the American Red Hat Society, whose members, all women over sixty, engage in playful behaviours and collective leisure pursuits that counter expectations about age-appropriate behaviours (such as pajama parties, hula-hoop competitions, costumed parades). Red Hatters strategically draw on negative stereotypes surrounding old age, such as cognitive impairments, to claim the freedom to ignore social rules: “Red Hatters protest ageist stereotypes of the elderly by dramatizing the label intended to subordinate them (i.e. ‘silly old lady’) [...] [through] interactional terrorism” (Barrett and Naiman-Sessions 2016:773).

⁹⁰“Et puis bon, on a l’âge qu’on a aussi, qu’est-ce que tu veux. Ça rentre en ligne de compte, surtout après ce que tu as subi, c’est un petit peu normal.”

That said, an analysis of older adults' relationship with discourses of aging in binary terms, as either compliance or resistance, fails to convey the complexity of older adults' attitudes toward contemporary norms of aging. It also risks interpreting any instance of non-conformity as an act of resistance. Older adults' attitudes toward the norms of contemporary old age lie on a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. This nuance is decisive in critical gerontology, a field that focuses on identifying traces of older adults' Agency in contexts that suppress their autonomy. Pritchard and Brittain (2015:130) address the issue in their study on older adults' refusal to use gerontechnology, asking "whether for an action to be considered a 'resistance', it has to be consciously and actively made". Katz (2018:8) points out the shortcoming of sociological traditions like the Certeausian "celebration of the politics of everyday life" that "burden[] ordinary activities and situations with expectations of radical forms of resistance". As an alternative to an analysis in terms of compliance and resistance, older adults' relationship with the successful aging discourse can be considered as first and foremost a matter of strategy.

As for the role of video game play in older adults' relationship with successful aging, it is ambivalent. It both reinforces the successful aging paradigm and provides older adults with tactical resources to circumvent its expectations. On one hand, video game play crystallizes dominant representations and norms of aging, further incorporating them into older adults' everyday life. The figure of the silver gamer discourse and the emergence of a dedicated market of video games "for seniors" reinforce the idea that, when older adults are involved, technology is first and foremost about health care (Iversen 2016). This limits older adults' ability to engage in leisure and playful activities "just for fun" and furthers representations of older adults as necessarily sick, frail, and dependent. On the other hand, video game play provides older adults with resources and opportunities to navigate the challenges of aging as a social process. Older players can use video games to perform successful aging and demonstrate that they remain adventurous, high-tech, and youthful at heart. They can frame their play as evidence that they engage in cognitive or physical exercise and take their responsibility to age well seriously. Alternatively, older adults see their play as an accessible and fresh opportunity to pursue lifelong interests or activities that they have had to renounce. Video games thus constitute a valuable discursive resource in navigating the norms and expectations of successful aging.

"We Play Scrabble Because We Like To Play Scrabble": Older Adults' Mixed Feelings Toward The Silver Gamer

Despite its success in institutional and media contexts, the silver gamer discourse is nearly absent from the accounts of older adults who play video games. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants make no mention of video games' intergenerational interest, health benefits, or contribution to their digital literacy. They do not echo the silver gamer discourse, even when organizers bring up its arguments, sometimes insistently:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] After the end of the workshop, a volunteer comes up to one of the participants and asks her whether he can

interview her; the *Golden-Age Games* association told him to get a participant's testimony (for PR purposes, I imagine). Here is the (incomplete but verbatim) transcript of the interview:

- Why do you come here?

- As a distraction, a way to take my mind off things. And be with other, be together.

[...]

- What do you get out of it?

- A distraction.

[...]

- Do you have an argument [for the workshop]?

- I told you, get my mind off things and meet new people.

The volunteer is not satisfied with the participant's answers and asks her the same question several times, hoping for a different answer. However, the participant sticks to her initial answer and does not provide much in the way of the silver gamer narrative. She mentions her desire to meet new people, but she wants to befriend residents rather than create intergenerational relationships with volunteers. The volunteer gives up when the participant becomes visibly annoyed. He concludes the interview by taking a picture of the participant, a process that makes them both laugh and restores an amicable atmosphere.

Participants discuss their health in everyday discussions, mentioning poor eyesight, broken ribs, headaches, the flu, surgical operations, *etc.* But they do not bring health into conversations about video games and *vice versa*. When organizers mention video games' potential effects on older adults' well-being and health, participants disengage from the interaction:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Two participants and two volunteers are sitting around a table. There are two tablets: on each tablet, a participant is playing while the volunteer watches. They are talking with each other, but almost exclusively about the game. Participants are playing word scrambles: they have to find words in a grid of letters. A participant tells the volunteer that she enjoys the game: "I like it!" The volunteer perks up and answers: "That's interesting! It's good for your memory!". The participant looks away and ends the conversation there.

In another workshop, a volunteer who suggested "Try to remember where the flowers are, it's good for your memory!" was faced with a similar reaction from a participant playing a *mémoire* (in which she has to find pairs of images) on a tablet.

The literature on older adults and video games provides additional illustrations of older adults' reluctance to frame video games as a medical device. De Schutter *et al.* (2014:1177) note that their respondents have ambivalent reactions to the argument of health maintenance through video games:

The game industry seemed to target [older adults] by presenting digital games as something useful, more specifically as a technology leading to improved health or self-cultivation. Starting to play digital games for such benefits led to mixed meanings. On the one hand, this promise of mental fitness through digital gaming left many participants feeling dissatisfied. [...] On the other hand, a group of participants indicated how they played digital games as a form of mental training.

Khalili-Mahani *et al.*'s (2020) study identifies a similar ambivalence. The authors start by mentioning the importance of health benefits as a motivation in older adults' video game play according to the literature. In the analysis of their video game workshops for older adults, however, they note that the participants who were most motivated by health concerns dropped out or preferred other activities (such as going to the gym). In the end, "Contrary to our assumptions, it was not so much the idea of gaming for health that attracted those who participated in this work" but curiosity and a desire to learn (p. 239).

There is one notable exception to the relative disinterest of older players in the silver gamer discourse from the perspective of successful aging. As De Schutter & Vanden Abeele indicate, the characterization of video games as cognitive training tools resonates with some older adults, particularly those who are invested in aging successfully. A few of my informants mentioned video games as a strategy to maintain cognitive performance and train their memory. Dominique mentions two hidden-object, point-and-click games as a form of memory training: "there are some I don't play anymore, it's called *Criminal Case*, and it's for my memory, and there's one, I still play that one, it's *Pearl's Peril*, it's for my memory too."⁹¹ She strategically uses video games and other activities to exercise her memory:

Well, I've always had memory issues, so I'm afraid, as I get older, I'll lose it more and more and so I strive to play games that rely on memory. [...] That means quickly finding objects on a screen, *et cetera*, remembering objects, so. Well, training my memory, that is.⁹²

Other interviewees are less straightforward and describe video games as a form of almost inadvertent cognitive training. In Nathalie's case, for instance, it is *via* her daughter that elements of the silver gamer discourse come up: "And so my daughter told me "Since I don't want you to lose your mind, mum, you must keep on playing!" [she laughs]⁹³".

Older players have an ambiguous relationship with the side of the silver gamer discourse that relates to video games and their rehabilitation. The argument according to which video games have benefits is troubling for many older adults who acutely remember the 1990s moral panics.

⁹¹"il y en a auquel je joue plus, il s'appelle *Criminal Case*, et c'est pour ma mémoire, et il y en a un, j'y joue encore, c'est *Pearl's Peril*, c'est toujours pour ma mémoire."

⁹² "Bah j'ai toujours eu un problème de mémoire, donc j'ai peur en vieillissant de la perdre plus et donc je m'évertue à jouer à des jeux qui font appel à la mémoire. [...] C'est-à-dire retrouver des objets sur un écran rapidement, *etcetera*, mémoriser les objets, enfin bref. Enfin voilà, exercer ma mémoire, quoi."

⁹³"Et puis ma fille m'a dit "Comme je ne veux pas que tu perdes la tête, maman, il faut que tu continues à jouer !" [rires]."

Moreover, this argument pigeonholes older adults as frail individuals who should structure their life around the threat of dementia and physical decline. That said, it constitutes a key argument in the defence of their practice. Older players manage this tension by defending a non-instrumental rapport to video games and talking about the non-age-specific benefits of video games. On one hand, interviewees often distance themselves from instrumental arguments. As Jacqueline says, talking about her computer games: “We play *Scrabble* because we like to play *Scrabble*. It doesn’t have [to be] something special.⁹⁴” On the other hand, older players agree with the sentiment that video games are good for one’s mental health, social inclusion and communication with loved ones, education and creativity, and cognitive performance. Interviewees are careful to draw on discourses that promote video games in general rather than the silver gamer discourse that specifically addresses seniors. For instance, when Alain defends the value of video games as cognitive exercise, he uses teenagers as an example:

And that, as far as I can remember, I’ve seen articles that said “Look, we, we conducted experiments with teenagers and we realized that quite on the contrary it stimulates their brain overall rather than, without getting into too much detail, the negative aspects”.⁹⁵

The themes that are most closely associated with the figure of the silver gamer (cognitive health, inter-generational relationships, and digital literacy) are nearly absent from interviews. But several respondents mention the educational potential of video games for school-aged children. Martine argues that “video games can work as a, a bridge to help communicate” in a time when “these days, what people suffer from the most is not feeling understood⁹⁶”. Several interviewees talk about video games and mental health, specifically depression:

So, I suffered from depression for a bit. And it's true that playing video games can help. At least it helped me. Because it allows, you know, when you're depressed, you're going through dark thoughts on a loop. And the game allows you to put that on standby for a while. Perhaps more effectively than antidepressants, if you know what I mean. [...] I think that these little moments where we manage to disconnect our brain from these grey and black images that overwhelm us, I think it ends up being good for us. That's how I feel.⁹⁷

The discursive context around video games is complicated by the coexistence of residual moral panics, attempts to rehabilitative and promote video games for their benefits, and adjacent

⁹⁴“On joue au *Scrabble* parce qu’on aime jouer au *Scrabble*. Il faut pas [que ça soit] quelque chose de spécial.”

⁹⁵“Et ça, autant que je m’en souviens, j’ai vu des articles disant, ‘Écoutez non, on a, on a fait des expérimentations auprès d’adolescents et on s’est rendu compte que au contraire ça stimule plutôt leur cerveau de manière générale, sans entrer dans les détails, que des côtés négatifs.’”

⁹⁶ “les jeux vidéo peuvent servir à, un pont de communication”; “Ce dont souffre les gens le plus à l’heure actuelle, c’est de ne pas être compris”.

⁹⁷“Donc j’ai connu un moment de déprime. Et c’est vrai que le jeu peut aider. Enfin en tout cas moi ça m’a aidé. Parce que ça permet, vous savez, quand on déprime, on est en boucle sur des idées noires. Et le jeu permet à un moment donné de mettre ça en standby. De manière peut-être plus efficace que les antidépresseurs, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire. [...] Je pense que ces petites périodes où on arrive à déconnecter notre cerveau de ces images grises et noires qui nous envahissent, je pense que ça finit par faire du bien. C’est mon sentiment.”

anxieties about new technology and “screens”. Older players are caught in the crossfire of the normative competition around video games. They rarely become unwavering promoters of video games; elements of moral panics coexist with techno-enthusiastic statements in their accounts. Interviewees tend to fluctuate between positive and negative appraisals of video games, sometimes in the same sentence.

Older adults express anxieties and disapproval toward video games inherited from 1990s moral panics and contemporary anxieties about screen time. Addiction is a recurring topic (*cf.* Chapter 6.1.), as in Alain’s case: “So no, I think that, it’s true that one has to be careful. Being addicted to video games, it’s a real thing.⁹⁸” Other criticisms include the low quality of many games, the poor design choices that make certain devices or games nearly inaccessible to newcomers, and the dangers of unsupervised play for children. Martine dislikes a YouTube channel because she feels that their coverage of video games is naive and incomplete: “And they don’t give, they don’t reflect on, precisely, parental control for instance, and informing parents about the video games that their kids are playing.⁹⁹” The preoccupations of older adults regarding video games closely resemble those identified in other studies on older adults and ICT, for instance in Vigouroux’s (2013) study on computer-using retirees whose main fears were addiction and scams.

Older players however also express praise for video games. A shift happens when the interview is already well underway and they have assessed that the researcher does not disapprove of their play, to the contrary. Although I am careful not to contradict them or give clues about my own opinion on video games, several interviewees ended up nuancing their criticisms toward the end of the interview. Philippe casts doubt upon his own criticism of the addictive nature of games:

Well, now it’s important not to overstate things, it’s not. I don’t have numbers on this, I don’t have studies. It’s true, back when I worked, twenty years ago, I had a cousin who came to visit, she had her kid with her. Her kid, um. He never looked up from, he always had, he was only ten, he was engulfed in these games on his little tablet, there. Well, he did very good in life, that kid [laughing].¹⁰⁰

Others mentioned the unreliability of media accounts and journalists’ misinterpretation of scientific studies, like Alain: “So, you have to take it with a grain of salt, because you’ve seen that when people tell us about scientific studies, you realize that most of them, often there are

⁹⁸“Donc non, je pense que, c’est vrai qu’il y a des précautions à prendre. L’addiction au jeu, c’est une réalité.”

⁹⁹“Et ils ne donnent pas, ils n’ont pas de réflexion, justement, sur le contrôle parental par exemple, et l’information des parents sur les jeux vidéo auxquels jouent leurs enfants.”

¹⁰⁰“Bon, maintenant il faut pas non plus généraliser, c’est pas. J’ai pas de chiffres, j’ai pas suivi d’enquête. C’est vrai, quand je travaillais, il y a vingt ans, j’avais une cousine qui était venu voir, elle était avec son gamin. Son gamin, euh. Il levait pas le nez, il avait toujours, il avait que 10 ans, il avait le nez dans ces jeux sur sa petite tablette, là. Après, il a très bien réussi dans la vie, le petit [rires].”

things that are complete baloney.¹⁰¹ Interviewees also nuance the dangers of video games by pointing out similarly unsafe practices that cause much less outrage, as does Alain: “Well, then, someone who has epilepsy, of course, they should not play video games with jerky graphics, etc. Etc. [...] It’s the same problem we had with stroboscopes in discotheques.¹⁰²”

At first sight, interviewees’ position on their practice seems ambivalent to the point of confusion. Yet it reflects a strategic use of discursive resources that allows older players to justify their practice or distance themselves from its most stigmatizing aspects. It takes a distinct form in older adults’ accounts, but this strategy is not specific or exclusive to them. Insofar as video games are still an object of normative conflict, players devise habits to manage their play and the potential stigma associated with it (Gerber 2015). Tactics include hiding one’s play from others, limiting one’s practice to avoid others’ anxieties or disapproval, framing one’s play as reasonable and normal as opposed to deviant play, assimilating video games to other less stigmatized practices, or highlighting the purported benefits of video games. Adults who engage in play face a similar type of disapproval and deploy comparable strategies (Deterding 2018). Alibis for adult play emphasize its instrumental potential: board games are about spending quality time with family, tabletop role-playing games train management and social skills, toy collections constitute a financial investment, colouring books are about stress relief and self-improvement, *etc.* Adults who play also engage in audience management, performing different roles with distinct discourses to adapt to the context.

Older adults’ accounts of their play integrate several of these obfuscation tactics. Interviewees define unacceptable forms of video game play (such as “war games” or Facebook games) and position their own practice in contrast to these deviant behaviours. They devise alibis for their play, sometimes self-consciously, as in the case of Michel who says of his *Solitaire 250+* game: “In my mind, which is, not twisted but perhaps a bit rigid, a bit strict, um, it was also a way, because I didn’t dislike exercising my brain cells.¹⁰³” Older adults occasionally refer to the health benefits of digital play. They do not play cognitive training games or medical games designed for seniors, but they use this argument to legitimize other sorts of games. De Schutter *et al.*’s (2014) study on the domestication of video games by older adults highlights a similar ambivalence regarding health as an argument in favour of play. While some of their informants talk about games as cognitive exercise, none play brain-training games; in fact, the respondent who did buy *Dr Kawashima’s Brain Training* ended up exchanging it for a game of mah jong. It seems that older video game players’ relationship with the silver gamer discourse is just as strategic and flexible as *Golden-Age Games* actors’, although for different reasons. Older players have a convoluted perspective on their play. Elements from the silver gamer discourse occasionally come up, particularly in relation to video games and their theoretical benefits, but

¹⁰¹“Alors, à prendre avec des pincettes, hein, parce que vous avez vu que quand on nous parle de publications scientifiques, on se rend compte que la plupart, souvent il y a des trucs qui sont complètement pipeau.”

¹⁰²“Après, bon, quelqu’un qui a des risques d’épilepsie, évidemment, il ne doit pas jouer à des jeux où les images sont saccadés, etc etc. [...] C’est le même problème que quand il y a eu les stroboscopes en discothèque”.

¹⁰³“[Se mettre aux jeux de cartes sur ordinateur] Dans mon esprit, pas tordu mais un peu rigide, peut-être, psychorigide, euh, c’était aussi une manière parce que ça ne me déplaisait pas du tout d’entretenir mes cellules grises.”

older players keep their distance from its hallmark arguments about cognitive health and intergenerational relationships. Older adults' accounts of their play are ambivalent: they successively attribute benefits to video games and reject instrumental play, or they acknowledge the supposed dangers associated with video games but dismiss their own concerns as greatly exaggerated or specific to certain gaming practices. Older adults' narratives of their video game play are complex enough that any interlocutor is bound to agree with them at least partly.

I Don't Play, I Can't Play, I Don't Want To Play: Video Game Play And Technology Non-Use

An overview of older adults' ambivalent response to the silver gamer brings up the question of technology non-use. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, residents' and participants' regularly refuse to play video games. Participants manage expectations surrounding their play by strategically disengaging from certain forms or spaces of play, sometimes successfully nudging organizers into offering new formats (*Wii Sports* minigames other than *Wii Bowling*, for instance, or puzzles and crosswords instead of *Wii Bowling*). Their behaviour belies organizers' expectation that digital play is a uniform experience. Older adults who play video games express strong preferences and dislikes; among interviewees, several stopped playing video games for months or years at a time because they stopped enjoying the game they played and could not find a suitable replacement. The interruption in their video game career is not merely the result of a lack of access, but also the expression of a choice. Although this analysis seems commonsensical, discussions on older adults and technology often put forward the issue of literacy or access at the expense of an interpretation in terms of choice and strategy.

Older adults' refusal to play, whether it is a general rejection of video games or a reluctance toward specific games or practices, questions the one-size-fits-all character of the silver gamer discourse. It relies on a simplistic view of older individuals who are imagined as preoccupied with their health and decline. The silver gamer discourse structures the debate in dichotomous terms of use and non-use, assigning a normative value to each behaviour. In that logic, if video games are good for older adults, then it follows that they should play, and promoters of the silver game discourse have a responsibility to help older adults overcome their natural reluctance concerning digital technology. In the discursive context of the silver gamer, older adults' non-use (and particularly intentional non-use) of video games becomes problematized. Older adults' refusal to play thus constitutes a challenge and a failure for actors such as the *Golden-Age Games* organizers.

Preoccupations over older adults' refusal to play video games reflect wider debates on digital literacy and technology non-use in old age. Older adults' low rates of technology equipment and use is a much-discussed topic among policymakers and social workers who often connect it with the notion of digital divide. The digital divide refers to inequalities in access to Information & Communication Technology that reinforce the social and political exclusion of disenfranchised populations. The term emerged in policy reports in the 1990s and has since

enjoyed consistent political and scientific attention (Gunkel 2003). The concept of the digital divide (“fracture numérique” and related notions such as “inclusion numérique” or “illectronisme”) has become a policy matter in France over the past decade. Recent policy initiatives include the 2018 “National Strategy for an Inclusive Digital Society” called “For a Connected France”, which is overseen by the State Secretary for Digital Technology. Concerned populations include people with low income, a low level of qualification, living in rural or ultramarine areas, and older adults (Legleye and Rolland 2019). Older adults are particularly affected given that age is indeed the main predictor for Internet use and other uses of digital technology (Baillet, Croutte, and Prieur 2019).

Critical appraisals of the concept of digital divide point out that its normative stance reinforces a technological imperative (Wyatt 2010). Older adults have complex and meaningful relationships with technology that the use/non-use dichotomy inadequately captures (Selwyn 2004). Older adults’ refusal to use a specific technology can be understood not as an uninformed decision motivated by fear and conservatism, but as a rational decision that individuals are entitled to make. In practice, non-use may stem from material or skill-related barriers, but it can also correspond to a lack of perceived need or an intentional refusal to engage (Granjon 2010). Older adults may refuse to use a device because, for instance, they prefer older technology that affords more satisfying connections with others, they find that it does not fulfill its promise and impedes their autonomy instead of protecting it, or they decide that they would rather not be constantly available to others (Fernández-Ardèvol, Sawchuk, and Grenier 2017). A perspective in terms of uses and their rationale (“logiques d’usage”) highlights that non-use among older adults is often related to the perception of a device as useless in the sense that it does not answer any existing need, or at least not as well as already-familiar older technology (Caradec 2001b). Fernández-Ardèvol observes that older adults do not report any adverse effects associated with voluntary non-use (2016). But their refusal to engage with technological devices creates tensions that are compounded by the successful aging discourse and its techno-enthusiastic perspective.

The duality of non-use, as a failure or lack of access and as the exercise of a choice, is apparent in older adults’ accounts of their play. Non-use is frequently mentioned in interviewees’ narratives. Several interviewees have had to give up on playing video games because of material or skill-related barriers at different points in their lives. Financial difficulties are a recurring topic, especially in women’s accounts. Sylvie started playing *World of Warcraft* on a private server because she was unemployed at the time and could not afford a monthly subscription. Martine had to sell her PlayStation and most of her games to finance her move to another city ten years ago. Nicole had to stop playing games for a while when she retired because the point-and-click games she played on her work computer were too resource-consuming for her home computer: “The computer was too slow, it kept freezing, it was no fun.¹⁰⁴” As for skill-related barriers, Alain addresses the issue, although he associates it with other, really old people:

¹⁰⁴“L’ordinateur était trop lent, ça se coupait, c’était pas marrant.”

But, I think with seniors there's really an issue with tactile devices. I'm saying that because I have two sisters who are ten, ten and eleven years older than me respectively. One has simply given up because no, see, it's too complicated, she's getting all worked up because of it. And the other one, it's the tactile aspect of things that holds her back.¹⁰⁵

It is difficult to clearly categorize instances of non-use into intentional and unintentional. Interviewees can frame something that they cannot do as something that they did not want to do anyway, like the proverbial fox who scorns the grapes it cannot reach. Overall, older adults' careers as video game players include more or less voluntary interruptions that draw attention to the constraints that limit older adults' play but also to their commitment to specific video games rather than a general and indiscriminate interest in any form of digital play.

¹⁰⁵“Mais, je pense qu'au niveau des seniors il y a vraiment un problème avec le tactile. Je vous dis ça parce que j'ai deux sœurs qui ont 10, respectivement 10 et 11 ans de plus que moi. Il y en a une qui a renoncé purement et simplement parce que non, voilà, c'est trop compliqué, elle se prend trop la tête avec ça. Et l'autre, elle, c'est le côté tactile qui la rebute complètement.”

3.3. Playing In The Panopticon

In its practical implementation, the silver gamer discourse is transformed by the divergences among its advocates and the ambivalence of older video game players. In the field, this translates into complex and at times tense interactions between older players and those who supervise or otherwise witness their play. In order to examine the power relations that shape older adults' play, this section considers instances of discipline and resistance in video game workshops taking place in total institutions such as nursing homes. The section begins with an analysis of *Golden-Age Games* participants' constrained play, contextualizing their experience in relation to total institutions, neoliberal governmentality, and mandatory play. It then looks at the ways in which participants manage to maintain some control over their play through strategic non-participation.

Disenfranchised Older Players

There is a significant power differential between the workshops' audience and the project's promoters. This assessment would certainly sound harsh to the people involved in the *Golden-Age Games* project, organizers and participants alike. During the months I spent touring workshops, I met people who were full of good intentions and genuinely believed that their action was making a difference. It may very well be true, and I witnessed many moments of joy and fun during the workshops. Nevertheless, as a sociologist, I am neither equipped nor willing to conduct performance appraisals or moralistic judgments. My argument is merely that the people who set up initiatives like *Golden-Age Games* are embedded into environments that structurally foster power imbalances, and that their kindness or sincerity is not enough to offset these tensions.

An analysis in terms of power is not an indictment of the coordinators, volunteers, or staff, but an acknowledgement of the constraints and vexations that older adults experience, particularly in medicalized institutions such as nursing homes. Social workers and institution's staff routinely dismiss participants' suggestions, attempt to trick or pressure participants into doing certain things "for their own good" (even after participants' repeated refusal), laugh at participants when they struggle, speak to participants exaggeratedly loudly and simply, or make derogatory remarks about old people in front of participants. Such interactions result from ageist stereotypes, dominant discourses about old age, and the professional socialization of medical and social workers. Independently of organizers' intentions or individual behaviour, older adults still must navigate spaces where their agency is called into question and undermined. The disregard for older adults is particularly intense and visible in aged care institutions, where a medicalized perspective on aging as irreparable decline and loss of personhood prevails (Planson 2000). In that sense, the experience of older video game players in aged care institutions, as described in this section, is not representative of older adults' play in general. Yet an analysis of older adults' digital play that excludes nursing home residents would be

incomplete, especially when a significant number of older adults who play video games do so in collective and institutional contexts¹⁰⁶.

The experience of older adults who participate in the *Golden-Age Games* project is shaped by the power relations that structure the project. Organizers position the workshops as events that bring something valuable and potentially useful to an unfamiliar, shy, but enthusiastic audience. Participants must negotiate with that position in order to play video games. As a result, participants have less control over their play than other actors such as volunteers, local coordinators, or leisure supervisors. They do not select the games and devices, the game modes, or the duration or frequency of play. Their constrained and controlled experience of video game play highlights the power relations at play in older adults' leisure.

Participants have a limited degree of control over the content of the workshops, which is determined by organizers. The *Golden-Age Games* board of directors provides a blueprint and guidelines for the project, establishing that the workshops must incorporate *Wii Bowling* and a local competition at the end of the year. Local coordinators adapt these terms to the local context, their resources, their priorities, and their investment in the silver gamer discourse. They negotiate with host institutions and their staff to adjust the *Golden-Age Games* workshops to their expectations. Volunteers then implement the program, usually following instructions to the letter. Local coordinators and host institutions' staff often tweak and adjust the workshops over the course of the year. While no specific group or individual among organizers has complete control over the workshops, organizers as a whole make all the decisions pertaining to the implementation of the project.

There is no procedure in place for participants to voice their preferences. Participants rarely express that they would like to try something or do one activity rather than another. And when they do, even the most motivated of organizers are unable to address these requests for newer games, different consoles, or very recent technology such as VR headsets, mostly due to lack of funds. This results, in rare cases, in participants convincing the host institution to buy a console or participants banding together to pay for one. A participant who has won a regional competition proudly explains that her victory helped her convince the cultural centre's director to buy a console, although she regrets that the director bought the wrong device (a Nintendo Switch instead of a Wii). Besides financial limitations, organizers are often too overwhelmed by their efforts to run the workshop to take additional requests into account.

A major stumbling block to participants' control over their experience comes from the fact that participants depend on organizers to play. Volunteers bring the consoles, games, and tablets, set them up and turn them on, guide participants through play, keep track of the score, solve bugs and misclicks, *etc.* In most workshops, participants would not be able to play without the

¹⁰⁶According to their own estimate, *Golden-Age Games* reached about 7000 older adults during the 2018-2019 season, a number that is congruent with my own data. For context, 79% of host institutions were *EHPAD* and *résidences-autonomie*. If we include similar initiatives mentioned in chapter 2, this suggests that aged care institutions are a significant space of introduction to video games for older adults.

volunteers. Very few volunteers take the time to teach participants how to use the consoles or tablets on their own. A notable exception is a volunteer who positions himself as a coach rather than a social worker. He wants “his” participants to become proper gamers and is intentional about teaching them how to play on their own: aiming, throwing the ball, but also navigating menus, starting a game, and even plugging in the console. Local coordinators do encourage volunteers to let participants manage on their own and fumble until they find a solution to their technical issues. However, in practice, play sessions are too short for participants to take their time with the machine without inconveniencing other participants or even depriving them of the chance to play more than a few throws. Overall, participants play at best once a week for two hours and they must share the console with several other players. These circumstances are hardly conducive to retaining information about the controllers or durably improving one’s performance. At a competition held during a video game convention, the defending champions lost against a team that had trained outside of the *Golden-Age Games* circuit and had unlimited access to a console, as a dejected member of the defeated team noted.

Participants’ autonomy is not necessarily a priority in workshops. The *Golden-Age Games* project values conviviality and intergenerational relationships as much as gaming skills and the ability to deal with technology on one’s own. If participants learned how to play on their own, the project would become pointless. A local coordinator and their volunteers describe a workshop where participants play on their own as “boring” (for volunteers but also for me as a researcher). Volunteers just have to show up with the console and stand around while participants play, which makes them feel that they are wasting their time. Following a similar logic, leisure supervisors sometimes reject *Golden-Age Games* workshops out of fear that residents would desert other activities or engage in unsupervised leisure:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] I talk with the coordinator while watching the game. She tells me that, in addition to the regular workshops, volunteers have also organized one workshop in each of the city’s six *résidences-autonomie*. It went very well, but the volunteers have not been asked back. The institutions already have their own Wii console and the leisure supervisors argued that *Golden-Age Games* would be superfluous. The coordinator thinks that the leisure coordinators didn’t want this “little bit of competition”.

This points to a tension that structures the notion of dependency in aged care, a phenomenon that Gucher (2012) describes as the paradox of technology designed to support autonomy in old age. While older adults and their caretakers describe dependency as utterly undesirable, the systems put in place to encourage autonomy often rely on surveillance, medicalization, and control, in the name of older adults’ security and caretakers’ limited resources. The ambiguity surrounding autonomy in the workshops brings to the fore the issue of control in institutional leisure.

Video Games In The Total Institution

Nursing home residents' lack of control over their play stems in large part from their position within the total institution. Total institutions function as distinct and closed social worlds structured by hierarchical authority and an extensive regulation of the lives of their residents (Goffman 1961). Alongside prisons, boarding schools, and psychiatric wards, residential aged care institutions such as *EHPADs* and *résidences-autonomie* qualify as total institutions. They are closed worlds in which residents are destined to stay until their death (Swane 2018). Most *Golden-Age Games* participants are residents of total institutions, a position that thoroughly shapes their experience of video games.

In a total institution, everyday life is structured by the power imbalance between residents and their carers. Residents struggle to maintain a sense of purpose and meaningfulness in the doubly constraining context of the fourth age and the total institution (Mallon 2007; Swane 2018). In aged care institutions, power relations are mediated by the medicalization of old age, particularly in *EHPADs* which accommodate individuals with high levels of dependency and/or disability. This medical paradigm dictates when residents get up and go to bed, what they eat and when, which activities they take part in, and whether they can leave the building and for how long. Staff also tends to perceive residents' actions, opinions, and feelings through the prism of medicalized old age. Dissatisfaction, requests, and interpersonal conflicts are regularly interpreted as signs of dementia, confusion, or a lack of self-control, and thus dismissed as unreliable or illegitimate. Dupuis *et al.* (2012) have described this phenomenon of "pathologizing behavior" in their study on relationships between nursing home staff and persons with dementia. While their research specifically concerns dementia, aged care institution staff adopt similar behaviours toward other residents, interpreting antagonistic or avoidant behaviours as symptoms of cognitive decline. In the context of *Golden-Age Games* video game workshops, nursing home staff, from doctors to leisure supervisors and nurses to psychologists, can determine that one person is "too competitive" for board games or "too tired" to go for an outing and thus control residents' access to activities. It is not the sociologist's prerogative to establish whether such decisions are medically sound. It is nonetheless noticeable that the decisions that govern residents' everyday life, including their leisure, are couched in a medical language that lends legitimacy to the authority that staff have over residents. The rapport between residents and staff also includes genuine friendships and close relationships, but even those take place within the scope of the total institution. It is in the residents' best interest to be perceived as agreeable and cooperative by the staff and to avoid complaining, criticizing, or entering direct conflict with others. This extends to the *Golden-Age Games* workshops, in which members of the staff and medical professionals participate directly and indirectly:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The physical therapist tells me that she is part of the team that selects which residents can participate in the workshops. The team includes leisure supervisors and medical professionals. They pick residents based on

their physical and cognitive health. Before every workshop, the leisure professional goes to these residents' rooms to invite them to the workshop.

The experience of video game play itself is reconfigured by its integration into aged care institutions. The intersection of the silver gamer discourse and the total institution create a distinct experience of digital play. The silver gamer discourse proposes a narrow perspective on video games that emphasizes certain aspects of play, such as cognitive training games and social play, at the expense of others, such as narrative-heavy genres or online gaming. The *Golden-Age Games* project is less restrictive in its understanding of digital play for older adults given its emphasis on competition and rowdy fun. But it still draws on the silver gamer discourse in many ways, including the choice of its flagship game. Nintendo's *Wii Sports* exergame has become emblematic of narratives about health and video games in old age. While other games are often available during workshops, organizers value Wii play significantly more than solo tablet play. On tablets, volunteers download games that align with narratives of cognitive training or socialization, such as quizzes, puzzles, and word games. Entire genres and themes are absent from the workshops, including popular and relatively easy to master games like hidden-object games or drawing games.

Secondly, the integration of video games into total institutions transforms video games. When actors attempt to introduce video games into these spaces, they have to tweak them to make them appropriate and intelligible in this environment. *Golden-Age Games* organizers have to accommodate host institutions' expectations and demands, even when it goes against their own understanding of play. A nursing home leisure supervisor asked volunteers not to bring the Wii because she thinks tablets are more cognitively engaging and safer than console play. On the opposite side of the spectrum:

[field notes from a discussion with volunteers] A volunteer tells me that in one *EHPAD* they are not allowed to bring the Wii. The *EHPAD* already has one that the medical professionals use with residents. The volunteer explains that the physical therapists don't want them playing *Wii Bowling* with residents because they would pick bad habits in terms of posture and motor skills.

In order to fit into aged care and total institutions, video game play is redefined according to a medical and instrumental logic that narrows the scope of play. In Goffmanian terms (1961, 1974), digital play changes when it shifts from one frame to another. Frame analysis considers the ways in which shared understandings of social situations are established, negotiated, and upheld by social actors. Transporting an object from a frame to another is a costly and contentious process. In order to shed light on the reconfiguration of video game play as it moves into the context of aged care institutions, I draw on Coville's (2016) study of video game exhibitions. Coville uses frame analysis to examine video games' entry into cultural institutions. Museum professionals work toward imbuing video games with cultural and artistic value by creating a distance with other, more familiar frames such as domestic play or gaming centres. They superimpose the museum frame on video game play through spectacular displays and

custom interactive devices that emphasize visitors' bodies and collective experiences. Museum professionals and *Golden-Age Games* organizers have similar preoccupations, including differentiating their play from run-of-the-mill, devalued, couch-potato forms of play, or reconciling various actors' competing understandings of what good and proper video game play is. The "recurring tension between video game objects and museum spaces" (p. 136) echoes the precarious position of video games in nursing homes.

Disciplinary Digital Play

Video game workshops in nursing homes are a recent iteration of the well-established tradition of institutional play. Historical studies show that play is an instrument of political power and control (Henricks 2008; Malaby 2009). As for video games, game studies scholars demonstrate that they have a distinct affinity with instrumental and disciplinary play (Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter 2009). In order to ground the analysis of workshop participants' experience into a larger context, this subsection successively considers play in institutions and video games in relation to governmentality.

Institutions and their administrators value play's potential as an instrument of discipline and training. In modern institutions, professionals and policymakers understand leisure in utilitarian terms that evoke the "useful leisure" celebrated by 19th c. moralists. To the latter, "play was not the enemy of education and public improvement but instead its powerful ally" to educate the working class and other turbulent groups (Henricks 2008:166). In aged care institutions, administrators use leisure programs to further and implement the principles of successful aging. Leisure supervisors thus prioritize activities that promote activity and busyness, health maintenance, and social connection (Marhánková 2011). Video games fit into this institutional approach to leisure in old age. Digital play is a form of leisure that can be collective, supervised, and modified to become accessible to differently-abled individuals. They are also relatively undemanding in terms of budget and space, at least in the form proposed by *Golden-Age Games*. Above all, they are supposed to have considerable benefits for older adults, to the point that their use can become therapeutic. The growing literature on the subject highlights the congruence between the possibilities offered by video games and the needs of care home administrators. For instance, Higgins *et al.* (2010:193) argue that

The Wii fulfils all the criteria cited by O'Sullivan for leisure activity programming in that it encourages participation in a meaningful activity, provides the stimulation of challenge, boosts confidence from the mastering of new skill, and often combines a person's past and present identity. In addition, it can contribute to client physical and psychological well-being and can lead to a sense of community and belonging.

Playful experiences also have the potential to pleasantly reinforce norms and foster a sense of community (Sutton-Smith 1997). The workshops and competitions provide host institutions with opportunities to generate a sense of camaraderie and group loyalty among residents and

staff who are involved in the project. Volunteers draw on the imagery of sports when they set up competitions, decorating the room with flags, providing jerseys for the players, and playing sports-themed music at the end of competitions. For instance, France's victory song for the 1998 Soccer World Cup comes up several times over the course of the fieldwork. In an attempt to get residents to feel a sense of belonging in their institution, leisure supervisors try to set up proper teams, champions, and supporters, as well as a sense of "us *versus* them". During competitions, organizers address the residents and players who sit in the audience to behave like proper supporters and clap and cheer, although with limited success. These attempts usually do not resonate with participants, but some groups do embrace the opportunity to fashion themselves into the representatives and champions of their institution:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] The centre's director greets me when I come in (thirty minutes late; the structure has two different buildings, and I got the wrong address). I ask her what she thinks of *Golden-Age Games*: she thinks it's a great idea and a fun activity, but it's a bit frustrating because participants can only send a small team to the regional competition since the workshops are open to people over 60 but the competitions are reserved for people over 65. Still, younger participants intend to come and support their team, so they've painted banners and invented a chant with a pun on the cultural centre's name. The workshop participants come over and start talking with the centre director: they are jokingly despairing that other cities' teams are actually very good at *Wii Bowling*. The director laughs and tells them that they are even more chauvinistic (about the centre) than usual.

In an *EHPAD*, the leisure supervisor and participants talk about this year's hopefuls for the local competition: "[Another *EHPAD*] they're really good", "They soundly beat us last time", "They've been practising for a while with [their leisure supervisor]". In a third workshop, the leisure supervisor and a few participants retrace the history of their star player: "When Mr. Dubois was there, that was something. - Ah for sure, we were ahead of the game for a while."

For an analysis in terms of power relations, it matters that the play featured in *Golden-Age Games* is digital play. As a medium and a technology, video games are saturated with issues of power. Like any cultural industry product and massively distributed media, video games spur discussions about propaganda, control, and manipulation. In that regard, they fall under the purview of cultural studies and the critical examination of culture as a privileged space for the expression of social conflicts and political struggle (Cervulle and Quemener 2015). Concerning video games and power, three avenues of research stand out. The first area of research focuses on the production of video games and the exploitation of its creators in contemporary capitalist societies (e.g., Kücklick 2005 on "playbour"; Whitson 2019 on game production as a "labour of love"; Knowles, Castronova, and Ross 2015 on game world economies). The second area of research explores matters of representations and identities within games and among players (see e.g., Shaw 2013 on not being a gamer; Gray 2014 on the experience of black women in online gaming spaces; Derfoufi 2021 on race in video games; Lignon 2015 on gender and women in video games). The third area of research interrogates the role of video games in fostering

compliance (or resistance) within the dominant social order. All three literatures shed light on older adults' digital play to some extent, but the literature on video games and neoliberalism is particularly relevant insofar as it echoes critical gerontology's analysis of contemporary aging.

This body of research explores video games' potential as an instrument of neoliberal governmentality. In the digital realm, "virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun" (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 2009: xxix-xxx). In the recent enthusiasm for gamification, Schrape (2014) sees a new mode of governmentality: libertarian paternalism, in which behaviour regulation is ensured through positive reinforcement instead of punishments. Kirkpatrick (2013) argues that digital play reconfigures Foucault's panoptikon into a phenakistikon in which individuals are cast as players who know they are being deceived but, dazed by confusion and pleasure, cynically keep on playing. For older adults, this means that video games materialize and actualize power relations in various ways: as disciplining leisure in the total institutions of old age, a technology of the self to maintain and enhance aging bodies, and an instrument that promote the norms of successful aging. While critical game scholars concur that video games have a strong affinity with neoliberal capitalism, they also highlight the potential for resistance and sabotage. Play occasionally offers opportunities and resources to question and subvert the social order. Play and games carry a strong disruptive potential, even when authorities enroll them: because of the fundamental mechanisms of play itself, "games can also outfox their sponsors, outstrip the intention to control them, and run wild in their outcomes and implications" (Malaby 2009:214). In video games, older adults also find opportunities to defy or circumvent the expectations and representations that constrain old age.

Play remains ambivalent as a site of resistance, as Le Lay's (2013) case studies of the integration of playful practices into labour illustrate. Comparing the ludic competition in a team of garbage collectors with the management-imposed competition between workers in a call centre, Le Lay shows that play can counter workers' sense of alienation as well as reinforce it. Digital play holds a similar ambivalence. Kirkpatrick (2013:35) considers the potential of gaming as social critique to be minimal but still concludes that "[g]ames are not straightforwardly complicit in contemporary ideology simply because of the disruptive and corrosive potential of play". Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter (2009) argue that the play of the multitude can open breaches in the games of the Empire, for instance through self-organized virtual worlds or subversive counterplay. Dragona (2014) presents several counter-gamification techniques, pointing particularly to those that disable the gathering of user data and undermine the biopolitical project behind gamification. In sum, while play is not necessarily liberating, it can foster subversion or at the very least constitute "an imaginative escape, an entry into formats that halt or countermand the claims of obnoxious bosses, economic uncertainty, irritating relatives, and so forth" (Henricks 2008:35). Therefore, my analysis considers older adults' digital play in terms of institutional power and social inequalities, but also in terms of individual strategies and initiative.

Play Beyond Fun And Freedom

The experience of *Golden-Age Games* participants brings into view a critical aspect of older adults' play (and video game play in general): while it may be a source of liberation and empowerment, play is also a site of surveillance and discipline, and it is not always a voluntary and free experience. In many *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants decide neither what they play, when they play, with whom they play, and in extreme cases, whether they play. The choice of attending the workshop is constrained when, for instance, the nursing home staff advises volunteers on which residents to call on, or when leisure supervisors pressure residents into participating. Furthermore, in some workshops, participants only have a vague idea of what is going on and thus have limited control over their experience. It is not easy for participants to follow whose turn it is for various reasons: the scoring chart on the screen is too small to be visible, volunteers sometimes devise a homebrew scoring system to circumvent technical difficulties, new players come in mid-game, *etc.* It is usually volunteers who keep track of the order in which participants play, and it is them who pass the controller back and forth between players. As a result, participants are frequently unsure about whose turn it is or who is winning, and they have to ask organizers in order to understand how the game is turning out:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] I usually write down the scores of the *Wii Bowling* matches I watch, but I'm confused because the scores are reset in what feels like the middle of the game. I have no idea who is winning [...] A participant strikes and says that it's her first strike today. Other participants tell her that no, it's her third. But since the scores on the screen aren't the real scores, they must be relying on their memory to know that.

Participants sometimes even let volunteers take over the controller, guiding their throw or throwing in their stead. In workshops where participants are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the console, volunteers help them play by wrapping their hand over the participant's hand and guiding their movements when a turn is taking too long and holding up the game. Overall, *Golden-Age Games* participants' experience sometimes seems to lack the major hallmarks of play. For participants, the workshops are associated – to various extents – with a lack of choice, pressure, stress, boredom, and very few opportunities to actually touch a controller. In some cases, participants do not even get to make the throw on their own. Such observations raise the question of whether *Golden-Age Games* workshops actually feature play.

The answer, at least as far as organizers and participants are concerned, is undoubtedly “yes”. The people involved in *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants included, describe the workshops as instances of play. The social actors who participate in the workshops agree over the interpretive scheme that organizes their expectations and interactions: they share a frame and collectively establishes the experience as play (Goffman 1974). In *Encounters*, Goffman (1961) “attempts to see how far one can go by treating fun seriously” and examines the work

that individuals conduct in order to set up and maintain gaming encounters. Their participants mutually sustain a definition of the situation as play and themselves as players. They navigate the tension between, on one hand, rules that establish the encounter as a world apart from everyday life, and on the other, all the events that disrupt the application of those rules. Disruptions include “external matters” such as constraining material conditions, “incidents” that reintroduce players’ identities and interpersonal relationships in the game, but also overwhelming flows of affect triggered by play. It is in the tension between those two poles that fun emerge, in the balance between taking a game too seriously and not seriously enough. The collective identification of a situation as play (and specifically here video game play) relies on a frame, that is, a set of assumptions, representations, and norms that is specific to a group’s culture and assimilated by individuals through socialization. Players enter into a complex interplay of action, attention, and interpretation of events to conform to the expectations set by the collective understanding that they are playing. In the case of video game play, such expectations include having fun, not being bored, becoming engrossed with the game, facing no consequences external to the game, and escaping from the obligations of everyday life (Deterding 2009). In the *Golden-Age Games* workshops, actors explicitly agree that they are partaking in video game play and act according to the expectations set by this frame. The workshops may feature disappointing play, constrained play, boring play, but it is play all the same.

If what takes place during *Golden-Age Games* workshops is play, then it provides us with an illustration of what play looks like when its participants are occasionally pressured into and closely supervised during play. In that sense, *Golden-Age Games* participants’ experience speaks to theoretical interrogations about play. Classical theories of play highlight both the importance of voluntary engagement in play and the freedom from ordinary life achieved through play (Henricks 2008). Beyond play theories, play is associated with the idea of freedom, particularly in its celebration by philosophers and poets associated with the Enlightenment and Romanticism such as Rousseau and Schiller (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Historically, political authorities have had a tense relationship with play precisely because of the freedom and subversion it permits (Woodyer 2012; Cousseau 2016).

Yet play is not necessarily a site of subversion and resistance or simply escapism and freedom. Play scholars have explored the coexistence of constraint and freedom within the experience of play (Gruneau 1980). Some instances of play are literally mandatory for players. The obligation to take part in play may be enforced through social pressure or cultural traditions, and certain forms of culturally and religiously significant play are inescapable. It is the case when, in carnivals and charivari, hapless passersby are unwillingly dragged into celebrations (Bakhtin 1984, cited in Sutton-Smith 1997), or in the religious and ritual competitions that Huizinga describes in *Homo Ludens* (1938). It is also the case when schools, workplaces, and residential institutions feature (near-)obligatory play, for instance in primary schools where collective games are part of the curriculum. In the workplace, challenges and other attempts at gamifying productivity or relationships with colleagues have become managerial tools (Le Lay 2013). Even when participation is theoretically voluntary, managers pressure workers into taking part,

and the mention of their refusal is recorded in their HR evaluation. Non-voluntary play is also frequent in the experience of parenthood in the form of “dispassionate play” (“*jeu sans appétence*”) (Coavoux & Gerber 2016). Because of play’s reputation as “the work of the child”, parents and caretakers are expected to make their children play, an activity in which they participate out of a feeling of obligation. This dispassionate characterizes “a large part of the playful and game-related practices among the larger population” (p. 146, my own translation).

The acknowledgement that play is sometimes mandatory, coercive, and devoid of free will enriches the study of play. This is not a new topic of interest for play scholars, who have long been preoccupied with the importance of rules and coercion and the weight of social and material constraints in play. But modern rhetorics of play promote a conception of play steeped in romanticism, individualism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism: play is above all a state of mind and an experience of the self. According to Sutton-Smith (1997:52), “older forms of play are typically more obligatory than they are optional. They offend the modern sensibility that play must be associated with voluntariness” and lead modern play studies to dismiss practices such as carnivals or gambling as “not really play at all”. While an emphasis on freedom in play legitimizes and celebrates play as an exhilarating and revolutionary experience, it also narrows down the concept of play to the point that several forms of play and games are arbitrarily excluded from it. In that regard, it is particularly relevant to pay attention to *Golden-Age Games* participants’ non-conventional play.

Strategic Non-Participation

Participants’ play experience is closely supervised and regulated by organizers, yet participants are not powerless. The second half of this section nuances the assertion that *Golden-Age Games* workshops are spaces of compulsory and disciplinary play by pointing out several sources of precariousness in the project.

Despite their lack of control over *Golden-Age Games* events, participants shape the workshops in discreet but compelling ways. They rarely engage in upfront negotiations with organizers, but they can and do indirectly exert pressure by “voting with their feet”: they stop coming to workshops until organizers change or drop elements that participants dislike. As a local coordinator summarizes, participants stop coming as soon as they are “fed up” with an activity but come back when something new is offered. When attendance numbers drop or regulars stop coming to the workshops, participants catch organizers’ attention, who often react by introducing new activities or discarding unpopular ones in the hopes of bringing participants back in:

[field notes from a discussion with a coordinator] In one of the *EHPADs*, volunteers struggled to find participants because no one wanted to play on the Wii or the tablets. The coordinator tells me that she suggested they should drop video games for a while

and play board games instead. Hopefully, volunteers will create relationships with residents and be able to convince them to try the Wii.

Through their decision to come, leave, come back, come but not next week, attend the competition, and play (or not), participants communicate their preferences to organizers and compel them to transform the workshops.

Participants' selective attendance belongs to the category of tactics rather than strategy insofar as there are no signs that this proceeds from a deliberate plan of action. But it does provide participants with a significant amount of control over the *Golden-Age Games* project, as illustrated by the extensive changes that many workshops go through over the course of the year or even over the course of a session:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The coordinator really wants residents to play *Wii Bowling* and tells volunteers to ask around. There are a dozen residents in the room. [...] A volunteer gave a tablet to a participant, but she leaves to play a board game (Triomino) with another resident. The volunteer comes back and tells the participant and resident to go play the Wii: they refuse. The coordinator gets involved and insists, but they still don't want to play (neither the Wii nor on the tablet). [...] The coordinator tries to get another resident to play: "Come on, it'll be fun, Mrs. Martin!" [...] The volunteers finally managed to get five residents to sit in front of the Wii, but they stand back up and go to a table: they apparently decided that they would rather play a card game (belote). [...] In the end, no one has played *Wii Bowling* and the coordinator is visibly annoyed. She loudly tells me about "the elderly" being lazy. A volunteer tries something new and tells two of the residents that they could play a musical quiz on the tablet: they accept and sit down with him.

In another workshop, after a similar back-and-forth, volunteers gave up and switched to other activities such as painting residents' nails. Participants' cooperation and goodwill prove indispensable to the conduct of the workshops. If participants do not attend the events, decline opportunities for play, or stop bringing their own devices to learn more about games, the workshops come to a halt.

The abstention tactic owes its effectiveness to the importance of attendance statistics for organizers. To local coordinators, the success of the project (and the value of their work) is measured through these numbers. Empty workshops register as a failure that is all the more crushing that many organizers see institutions' residents as lonely old people who crave company and would sign up for anything. Local coordinators are also preoccupied with volunteers' well-being and worry that workshops with one or two participants will discourage volunteers. To the association's board of directors, the project's survival is at stake. Growth is a central preoccupation for the project leaders and their partners, in part because funding usually asks for evidence that the workshops enjoy great popularity and perform a much-needed service. Moreover, many organizers at every level of the *Golden-Age Games* project genuinely believe

that older adults would enjoy and even benefit from playing video games. They task themselves with convincing older adults to overcome their initial reluctance and discover the wonders of digital play. In that sense, many organizers perceive low attendance numbers as a sign that they have fallen short in helping older adults age successfully. Organizers are committed to enrolling as many participants as possible and workshops sometimes bring together ten to twelve players around a single Wii console. A local coordinator explains that she asks volunteers to set up board games alongside video games so that the workshop accessible to as many older adults as possible: it is important that no one is “neglected”.

The importance of attendance for the *Golden-Age Games* project puts an emphasis on data collection and quantitative indicators. Upon the request of the association’s board of directors, volunteers keep track of several indicators concerning the workshops and their participants. Local coordinators compile these spreadsheets and send them to the national office of the civic service provider and the association’s board of directors. There are several types of reporting spreadsheets that keep track of the participants and their profile (including their name, age, dependency level, and attendance) as well as the workshops themselves (including the number of sessions and details on the type of games and play). Volunteers and coordinators have to regularly update and report to national managers, a process they describe as “heavy-duty” and taxing. The association and civic service provider use this data in their funding applications and public relations. The growing number of participants and workshops supports their arguments that the project does fulfill its objectives and meets a need. It also serves to counter a widespread assumption that has held back the project, that is, that older adults do not care for video games.

Participants’ abstention also derives its efficiency from the flexibility of the workshops. The association’s board of directors and civic service provider’s managers have given local coordinators broad guidelines and considerable leeway in the implementation of the workshops. While workshops are expected to feature *Wii Bowling*, this expectation is not strictly enforced. In practice, workshops feature a constantly evolving mix of tablet games, console games, board games and card games, music and karaoke, lessons on how to use various digital devices, repair services, conversations, outings, *etc.* Organizers are able to adapt and transform the workshops quickly to stop participants’ exodus if necessary.

“No One Wants To Play”

The impact of participants’ non-attendance is increased by *Golden-Age Games* organizers’ struggle to recruit participants. Overall, workshops are well-attended with six participants per workshop on average in the thirty workshops I observed, and in some cases, volunteers have to manage large groups of ten or fifteen. But many workshops only bring together a few residents, and most regulars come and go as they please, prioritizing other activities when a scheduling conflict comes up. Most dishearteningly for organizers, residents who walk by the workshops almost systematically refuse to join the game. Coordinators, leisure supervisors, and volunteers

spend a significant amount of time trying to convince residents to join the workshop, with mixed results.

The frequency at which older adults refuse offers to participate in the workshop is problematic for organizers. Leisure coordinators and volunteers often call out to passersby and spectators to invite them to try out the game or attend the next workshop. Most of the time, they face a refusal, sometimes in the form of a strongly worded critique of the workshop or a brisk walk in the opposite direction. When a resident comes to talk with a participant about planned work in the *EHPAD* and a volunteer invites her to stay for the game, the resident answers “Certainly not!” and leaves immediately. A resident who watches participants play and cheers them on replies less abruptly but just as firmly: “I’m just watching for afar, sir, thank you.” Participants are not much more successful than volunteers and coordinators in convincing other residents to play. A participant who was summoned by the leisure supervisor tries to get her friend to come with her, to no avail: again, “Certainly not!” Participants’ rejection of the workshop sometimes takes epidemic proportions. When a coordinator comes to visit a workshop, she sees that no one is playing the Wii and asks for an explanation. Dejected volunteers tell her that they have set up the console and tried to gather participants, but “no one wants to play.”

Organizers and in particular coordinators are surprised by potential participants’ disinterest. The general sentiment among organizers is that bored and lonely older adults would be eager to participate in an event that combines digital technology, fun games, and time spent with young people. Volunteers assume that everyone would jump on the opportunity to play video games because they would love to play all day. Several coordinators and volunteers mention the discrepancy between their expectations and the actual experience of the workshops. As a result, organizers regard participants who refuse to participate or skip workshops as unreliable and ungrateful. They associate these participants with the counter-model of the “customer”. Although participants’ casualness preoccupies many organizers, some are more philosophical about it: “if it doesn’t catch up, maybe it’s because there is no need for it”, a coordinator remarks.

Tensions around participants’ abstention (from playing or even attending workshops) highlight that there is work involved in convincing older adults to play video games. Local coordinators and leisure supervisors devise strategies to inform and entice potential participants:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The volunteer sits with a resident, showing her the tablet and *Google Street View*. The volunteer asks the participant questions about her life (where she was born, where she lived) to look them up on the map. The participant barely answers. [...] The leisure supervisor gathers about twenty residents for his daily news roundup. [...] He takes the opportunity to present *Golden-Age Games* to residents in order to help the volunteer recruit participants. He shows a promotional video provided by the association. The supervisor comments that the participants in the video are “people just like you”, “the elderly seem to love it”. He says that during competitions participants get to meet new people and visit other nursing homes. The supervisor plays up the inter-generational aspect: he explains that his grandfather taught

him how to play checkers and now the volunteer, “your granddaughter”, will teach them how to play “these new games”.

In a significant number of workshops, volunteers and staff go to participants’ rooms to escort them to the workshop. In contrast with the expectation that older adults would flock to the workshops, it appears that many participants do not attend unless individually and insistently asked by volunteers:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The leisure supervisor asks volunteers: “Did no one answer when you checked their rooms?”, “Where on Earth are they?”, “Can you check on Mrs. Smith again?” She tells volunteers that they must be persistent and knock until they get an answer because residents can’t hear too well and have probably forgotten about the workshop.

Volunteers’ door-to-door canvassing proves critical in some workshops. In an *EHPAD* where workshops bring together ten participants on average, one session is completely empty. It turns out that in this institution leisure supervisors fetch the participants themselves because they do not want volunteers to wander around and knock on everyone’s door. This week, the leisure supervisors were on vacation: no one toured the rooms, so no one showed up.

In addition to their efforts to mobilize potential participants and even workshop regulars at the start of each session, organizers attempt to recruit new players among onlookers and passersby. As mentioned above, they experience a high refusal rate. The typical pattern of interactions is as follows:

[field notes] A resident is sitting in the common room near the Wii, where a dozen participants are playing *Wii Bowling*. A volunteer comes up to her and asks whether she’d like to play. She says no. Another volunteer joins in and tells her that it would be fun. Again, no. The leisure supervisor comes over and asks her a third time. She says “Not today”, and the supervisor finally says “Well, okay.”

A close-up study of these interactions sheds light on two critical elements: how the promoters of older adults’ play make sense of their reluctance to play, and how older adults who do not want to play video games feature in the workshops. It also constitutes an opportunity to give a voice to the latter group which is under-represented in the present research.

Older adults who refuse offers to play generally provide justifications and explanations for their refusal. However, organizers do not share older adults’ understanding of what constitutes a good enough reason not to play. Coordinators and volunteers devise theories and arguments to understand and overcome the reluctance of older adults. The consensus is that older adults, deep down, want to play but self-exclude from the workshop because they are afraid (of their lack of skill, of other people’s judgment, of looking silly). A coordinator explains that residents refuse

to play because it is a “terrifying perspective” to fail at an activity designed for children. In another workshop,

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A volunteer tells me that residents refuse to play because they have low self-esteem. The leisure supervisor hears him and agrees. They explain to me that participants often say “I suck”, “I’m useless”. The volunteer says that he makes a point of reassuring them: “We tell them they’re great at it”. He then theorizes that this lack of self-esteem is typical of the era during which participants were brought up, especially women.

Another coordinator has a less charitable explanation and repeats several times that the elderly lack enthusiasm, energy, and curiosity:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The coordinator tries to convince a resident, sitting next to us, to play the Wii. The resident is polite but firm. The coordinator then turns to me and laments that the elderly are always looking for excuses not to play because they are lazy. They pretend to have a headache or that they are afraid of hurting themselves. The resident, who can perfectly hear the coordinator, glares at her but remains silent. I am *extremely* uncomfortable.

According to organizers’ logic, if the main issue is older adults’ lack of self-esteem, then the best course of action is to insist until they cave in. One attempt might be all it takes for older adults to overcome their self-consciousness and realize that playing video games is less difficult and more fun than they imagined. Local coordinators, leisure supervisors, and volunteers feel obligated to invite as many older adults as they can to the workshops and insist when they refuse, jokingly but relentlessly. It sometimes works:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] The leisure coordinator tells a resident who already declined to join the workshop that he has to either play video games or sing them a song. The resident sits down in front of the Wii.

Organizers indeed rarely take no for an answer when residents argue that they cannot play because of an illness or disability:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A resident comes to the common room and wants to play cards. One of the organizers happily tells her that there are already four people at the cards table and that she is “has no choice but” to play the Wii. The resident refuses and explains that her arm hurts. The organizer does not relent and gives a tablet to the participant.

Still, most older adults continue to refuse despite organizers’ insistence. They use arguments that they believe cannot be countered: they have another meeting or activity to attend, people

are waiting for them, or they have a health issue flaring up. Some make jokes that leave no room for a response:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A resident who had played the week before refuses to join the workshop this time. Every time an organizer tries to convince him to stay, the resident answers with a riddle or a joke until the organizer gives up: “I’m afraid I’ll lose my marbles!”, “When you get pins you should go fishing!¹⁰⁷”.

Some residents do join the workshop after being asked once or twice. Their reaction validates organizers’ reasoning. Their initial refusal is a half-hearted one that calls for a rebuttal: they could not possibly play because they do not know how to, they do not want to disturb the course of the workshop, or there are not enough chairs. Organizers are quick to point out that it is a workshop for beginners, there are other chairs in the room next door, and they can try with a tablet first if they want. Once reassured, the older adults come and usually stay until the end of the workshop. But even in such cases, participants’ acceptance is sometimes ambiguous:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence autonomie*] A volunteer comes up to a participant who is putting the tablet down: “Do you want to keep playing? - No, if someone else wants to play. - No, no one does. - Well, I’ll keep playing then. I’m a simple and obedient person!”

Finally, there is one last resource that *Golden-Age Games* participants sometimes take advantage of to reclaim some control over their play: their relationship with volunteers. Volunteers often attempt to position themselves as social workers and exert the same sort of authority that leisure supervisors have over residents:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Two volunteers are giving instructions to a participant who is learning how to play *Wii Bowling*. The participant doesn’t wait for them to finish their explanation and throws the ball. The volunteers scold her for being impatient and react to her failed throw with “You’re messing it up again!”

However, their age and lack of experience limit their ability to inhabit the role of the jolly but authoritative social worker. Most volunteers have received no training in social work, event facilitation, or aged care. While some quickly find their footing, a significant proportion of volunteers find it difficult to speak in front of a group, let alone facilitate the play sessions. When timid volunteers recede into the background, participants usually step up to reassure volunteers and help them. Participants encourage and congratulate volunteers, provide enthusiastic feedback on their efforts, give them advice and pointers on how to best conduct the workshop and help players, talk with them about their lives and interests, and overall make sure that volunteers do not feel lost, bored, or incompetent. Participants characteristically

¹⁰⁷”J’ai peur de perdre la boule!” ; ”Quand il y a des quilles, on va à la pêche!”; in French “quilles” are both bowling pins and the end of the military service, a metaphor for free time.

congratulate volunteers at the end of the workshop: “You’re going to go home now, kids. You’ve done a great job!”, “You’re helping us a lot”; “Thanks, you’re really kind, I still have a lot to learn from you”. Participants do their best to comfort volunteers who are at risk of losing face and exposing some sort of incompetence. For instance, whenever participants win against volunteers during a match of Wii Bowling, participants are always quick to downplay their victory and attribute it to luck... or the volunteers’ teaching skills. Volunteers are sometimes aware of participants’ efforts to humour them and help them out. A volunteer remarks: “They play to be nice to us”. Another comments on participants’ willingness to take selfies and Snapchat pictures with them: “we annoy them with that stuff”, but “that makes us laugh”. This situation is not characteristic of every workshop, but it constitutes a pattern, particularly in workshops with younger participants. In these workshops, volunteers generally go with the flow and follow the direction given by participants who therefore get to play in the way that they prefer, or at least that no one in the group intensely dislikes.

Conclusion

Older adults' video game play is a contested practice. Far from establishing a consensus, the silver gamer discourse further disrupts older adults' play. Efforts to implement the silver gamer discourse (for instance with initiatives like *Golden-Age Games*) bring to light the power relations and divergences among the actors involved in older adults' play. On one hand, older adults who play video games show little interest in the figure of the silver gamer. They do not echo narratives about video games' anti-aging benefits, even in contexts where other actors actively bring them up. Older players are invested in discourses about video games, expressing anxiety and enthusiasm regarding their rumoured effects, but not in relation to their age. On the other hand, the silver gamer discourse is a widely shared reference among actors involved in initiatives on older adults and video games, including *Golden-Age Games* administrators and local coordinators, but also nursing home staff and senior officials who participate in their events. Many are quite invested in the silver gamer discourse, although several perspectives coexist within networks such as the *Golden-Age Games* project. The flexibility of the silver gamer discourse, that is, its ability to accommodate different understandings of aging and technology depending on its interlocutors, is critical for the project's success.

The silver gamer discourse actualizes and reinforces power relations, particularly the power differential that put older adults in a marginal or subordinate position. It is particularly visible in aged care institutions and medical settings, but it is not absent from older adults' life outside of these spaces. This contextualizes older players' reaction to interactions, representations, or material settings that bear the mark of the silver gamer discourse: no outright protest or rejection, but instead a refusal to address age-related arguments and a redirection of the discussion. In aged care institutions, workshop participants engage in tactical non-participation to ensure that organizers take their preferences into account. It is up for debate whether these behaviours qualify as resistance. Nonetheless, they highlight that older players do not merely comply with the expectations that surround their play, even when the people who supervise their play provide regular and insistent reminders of the silver gamer discourse.

Older players' reactions to the silver gamer discourse reflect a widespread ambivalence toward successful aging among older adults. The successful aging narrative has its supporters among them, but its expectations prove unattainable for many. Another route, then, is to selectively draw on the successful aging narrative in order to justify otherwise problematic activities like digital play. In turn, video games become a resource to negotiate the expectations of successful aging. In that sense, video games are a leisurely Trojan horse that lets older adults enjoy themselves under the guise of preparing for a successful old age.

CHAPTER 4. MEANINGFUL PLAY

Embracing Video Game Play In Old Age

“You must accept that you have to slow down, and based on that, compensate with something else. That’s why I play video games, why do you think – no but really! What I cannot do anymore, see, what I cannot do anymore in real life, I make my characters do it.”¹⁰⁸”

Martine

At the beginning of the interview with Bernard and Dominique, a couple who lives in the south of France, both attributed their discovery of video games to their youngest son. When I asked them how they started playing, Dominique answers straight away: “Well with [our son], clearly. Yes, he showed us games and so we got hooked!¹⁰⁹” He now works as a game designer, gets his parents to playtest games, and brings his console whenever he visits. But as the interview proceeded, Dominique and Bernard remembered that they started playing much earlier, in the 1980s, when they were in their thirties (for her) and forties (for him). They occasionally played *Mario Bros.* with Bernard’s eldest daughter and son-in-law and later played the game programs that came for free with the computer magazines they bought.

This kind of gaming career – lengthy, intermittent, and underestimated by players – is frequent among older adults who play video games. In this chapter, I consider older players’ history with video games in order to grasp how they build a relationship with the practice and how this relationship shifts when they enter the social, cultural, and material condition of old age. Whether they are seasoned gamers or newcomers to the practice, older video game players face specific challenges in terms of representation, access to resources, and normative expectations. But, as their video game careers illustrate, certain circumstances or dispositions counterbalance the tensions between old age and digital play that may otherwise discourage older adults from playing. Older players manage to bring video games into their everyday life by connecting them to earlier technological practices, pre-existing interests or hobbies, and meaningful relationships.

I argue that, to older players, video game play is valuable because it creates opportunities to negotiate the meanings associated with old age and maintain a sense of self throughout this often unsettling stage of the life course. Far from the silver gamer discourse and its call to transcend aging with innovative technology and self-discipline, older adults’ digital play is

¹⁰⁸“Il faut accepter d’être ralenti, et en fonction de ça, pallier par autre chose. C’est pour ça que je joue aux jeux vidéo, qu’est-ce que tu crois. Non mais je t’assure. Ce que je ne peux plus faire, bah oui, ce que je ne peux plus faire en vrai, je le fais faire par mes personnages.”

¹⁰⁹“Bah avec Carl [rires] c’est clair. Ah oui, il nous a montré des jeux et voilà on a été mordus !”

about comfort, adaptation, and continuity. In that sense, they experience and make peace with old age through video game play.

Several elements support older adults' video game play and imbue it with meaning: early, recurring, and positive encounters with video games over time (4.1.), the supportive role of video games in constructing a desirable identity in old age (4.2.), as well as a flexible and creative attitude toward technology that reconciles video games with the aging body (4.3.) and the material and social context of old age (4.4.).

4.1. Video Games In A Lifetime of Play And Technology

Older adults' video game play takes place within a long biography as well as an unsettling stage of the life course. It reflects and actualizes older adults' complex relationship with technology, particularly "new" technology, and leisure. The domestication of video games in old age is challenging but also meaningful, as illustrated by older adults' long, non-linear video game careers in which digital play perpetuates pre-existing technology uses and leisure activities.

Video Games In The Biography Of Their Players

The biographical trajectories of players shape their video game play. Previous experiences with technology, play, and leisure contextualize how they relate to and engage with video games. Game studies scholars have highlighted the importance of players' personal history in the constitution of their practices. In her ethnography of video game play set in young adults' households, Thornham (2011:21) notes that

games have both longevity and nostalgic (pleasurable) meaning for the gamers of the project. Contrary to much new media theory, then, where technology is often addressed in its novelty, these comments suggest there is a clear history of technological relations and mediation, which shape and construct how gamers feel about that technology today.

Likewise, it is in their biographical trajectories that older adults who play video games find the resources and meanings that support their play.

Older adults' experience with video games is also affected by their position in the life course. The concept of the life course describes the succession of stages and events that structures individual lives in a given social and cultural context. In contemporary France, for instance, life course stages include childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, while life events may include entry into the labour market, the birth of a child, a serious illness, a long-distance move, etc. A perspective in terms of life course follows five principles: development and aging are lifelong processes; individuals have agency within constraints; lives are shaped by the historical time and place in which they take place; the impact of life events on an individual's life varies depending on their timing; and individual lives are linked together (Elder *et al.*, 2003). The concept critically examines the norms concerning the connection between ages and social roles (such as the notion that one should have children by a certain age and/or a certain number of years after marriage) in order to highlight the socially constructed and political dimension of the life course (Lynch & Danely, 2013). It pays close attention to individuals' strategies to appropriate the age-related roles cast upon them, evade them, or cope with their inability to conform to the normative model. The life course perspective complements biographical analysis by drawing attention to the interaction between cultural patterns, social norms, and individual trajectories.

In her research on older adults' play, Brown proposes a perspective that considers digital gaming in light of the life course and players' biographies (2014). It highlights the interaction of motivating factors, experience with gaming, and functional abilities in older adults' play. Brown's model is dynamic in order to acknowledge both the reconfiguration of each factor over time and the rich gaming careers of her respondents. It highlights the importance of elements such as individuals' (former) careers, material access to technology, changing physical abilities, and longstanding interests and hobbies. This section adopts a similar approach and examines how older adults' video game play unfolds over time. It situates older adults' video game careers in the context of individual biographies and the life course. The first half of the section considers how digital play features into a lifetime of leisure and play and into the technobiography of older adults. The second half of the section examines the patterns that characterize older adults' video game careers.

“You Never Really Heal From Your Childhood”: A Lifetime Of Leisure

Old age sets off a specific relationship with play and leisure. Hendricks & Cutler (2003) note that leisure in contemporary old age is made particularly meaningful by both the institutionalization of retirement and late modernity's revalorization of leisure as self-expression. Consequently, leisure in old age

is not the marginal, ancillary activity it is sometimes thought to be. It is a forum, though certainly not the only forum, wherein important agency takes place and possible selves are tried out as actors adapt to the ongoing flow of events in their lives. (p. 115)

Leisure in old age is also shaped by the life events that are often associated with old age (such as retirement, entry into a residential aged care institution, grandparenthood, etc.). These factors intersect with the preferences and precedents set by individual biographies to produce forms of leisure that are typical of old age. Hendricks and Cutler mention young seniors' tendency to introduce a sense of busyness and professional ethos into volunteering, for instance. By contrast, Deem's (1986) ethnography of women's leisure notes that old age and its changing circumstances (such as low pensions resulting from an irregular involvement in the labour market, or widowhood and the economic precarity that comes with it) further limit women's participation in leisure.

Older adults integrate video games into a life that is already structured by a long experience with play and leisure. This experience shapes the relationship that individuals create with video games¹¹⁰. Older adults position video games in relation to leisure and play practices that they are already involved in, that they have given up, or that rely on circles of sociability set up through other activities. Chantal followed “the girls”, her close-knit group of girlfriends with

¹¹⁰Because older players can categorize video games as either (or both) leisure and play or compare them with practices that pertain to either of those categories, the analysis of older players' life stories considers play and leisure together.

whom she regularly goes to the cinema or out to dinner, on the word game *Ruzzle*. She stayed there when her friends left the game a few years ago. Philippe's video game play is part of a broader interest in planes. He enjoys flight simulators alongside his actual plane rides, the documentaries he watches on YouTube, or the plane-building forums he participates in. Philippe started playing on a friend, colleague, and fellow plane enthusiast's insistent suggestion:

after I changed departments at work, I ended up working with a very cool friend who had all the software, including the, the latest flight simulators. And so, in fact I began to get hooked to flight simulators. But in a, let's say, an episodic way¹¹¹.

Philippe tested these games in 2002 but started to get invested in flight simulators several years later, in 2006, when the graphics finally became realistic enough for him.

Older adults' biography of play and leisure shapes their rapport with video games. Individuals carry over conceptualizations and rules related to play and leisure from their childhood all the way into old age (Brown & De Schutter, 2019). Sylvie has a fraught relationship with play that dates back to her youth as an only child raised by her grandparents and encouraged to focus on school: "No, there never was any play in my life, because I was never taught. [...] [I] never played, as far as I can remember, but on the other hand I studied a lot¹¹²." Bernard traces his discomfort with play back to his father's disapproval of wasted time: "I'm slowly getting over it, but I believe that, the notion of leisure to me is pernicious. "You've got nothing better to do", it's always the same thing. You never really heal from your childhood." Interviewees' accounts of leisure and play are heavily normative. Some forms of leisure are particularly valued (for instance playing outside or playing with friends) while others are disapproved, although it is occasionally leisure as a whole that becomes suspect (see Chapter 1).

"It Started With Solitaire": Techno-Biographies

Older adults' careers as video game players are embedded into their technological biography. On a practical level, pre-existing equipment and uses shape individuals' investment in video games. Older adults bring skills and reflexes that they have acquired with other technology into their video game play. This has straightforward implications as well as more indirect consequences. A person who already uses a computer will find it easier to take up computer games than someone who does not; but they will also find it easier to pick up tablet games because they have already mastered concepts such as the existence of menus or the notion of clicking on something (that is, the action of pushing a button to select a space on the screen that corresponds to an action on the part of the computer, a concept that is far from intuitive). Jouët (2000:501, my own translation) describes it as a genealogy of uses: as representations and

¹¹¹ "Après un changement de département dans mon boulot, je me suis trouvé à bosser avec un copain très sympa qui avait tous les soft, dont les, les derniers simulateurs de vol. Et donc en fait j'ai commencé à accrocher aux simulateurs de vol. Mais d'une manière, on va dire, assez épisodique, quoi."

¹¹² "Non, il n'y avait pas de jeu dans ma vie, parce qu'on ne m'avait pas appris. [...] [J]e n'ai jamais joué, du plus loin que je m'en souviens, mais en revanche j'étudiais beaucoup."

practices are imported from one technology to the next, “there is no *sui generis* use and [...] ICT adoption is articulated with pre-existing practices and capacities.”

In some cases, technological devices that individuals already own for other uses (such as computers or mobile phones) trigger play. An archetypal example is Windows’ preinstalled *Solitaire* game, as in Christine’s case:

it started. Well, with *Solitaire*, I believe. [...] But when you had a laptop, I remember the, well laptop computer I mean. There were games installed on it. [...] And so well I played a few games sometimes. I was working and to clear my head, bam, I’d play a few games.¹¹³

Christine stopped playing *Solitaire* when it ceased to be included in Windows computers. In return, older players’ interest in video games sometimes prompts them to acquire new equipment or experiment with new uses. Christine engaged with a social media platform that she despises because it allowed her to continue her play:

I like [*Gummy Drop*]. To the point, that’s important, to the point that I was quite opposed to Facebook. But when I had to change my phone in April of 2019, in fact, well I didn’t want to lose my progress in *Gummy Drop*. [...] And the only way I could, it was in fact to get Facebook so that, um, there would be a transfer between the two. [...] And so then I got Facebook. And there, well, I got caught up in it, too.¹¹⁴

A sense of familiarity with digital technology contributes to making video games less strange and more accessible. When it comes to new technology, older adults tend to be selective – not out of conservativeness or fear, but for practical reasons (Caradec 2001a). They have a long experience in learning to use new devices that end up becoming obsolete after a few years. To convince older users, a new device has to answer their needs better than its predecessors. Christine says of her older iPhone model:

You see so I know, I believe they’re up to [model] 11 now, and well I’m always late in that regard. [laughing] But that’s all right with me, it is, so as long as it suits me and it works, it’s all good.¹¹⁵

¹¹³“Ça a commencé. Bah, avec le *Solitaire*, je crois. [...] Mais, lorsqu’on avait un portable, je vois le premier, enfin ordinateur portable, j’entends. Il y avait des jeux qui étaient installés dessus. [...] Et donc bah oui je faisais des parties, des fois. Je travaillais et puis pour me changer les idées tac je faisais des parties.”

¹¹⁴“Alors on gagne des sous, on en perd, on a des boosters, enfin bon, moi j’adore, j’aime bien. Au point, ça c’est important, au point que j’étais assez réfractaire à Facebook. Mais quand j’ai dû changer de téléphone en avril 2019, en fait, enfin je ne voulais pas perdre ma progression de *Gummy Drop*. [...] Et le seul moyen que j’avais, c’était en fait de prendre Facebook pour, euh, qu’il y ait la bascule entre les deux. [...] Et donc du coup j’ai pris Facebook. Et alors là, je me suis prise au jeu, par contre, aussi.”

¹¹⁵“Vous voyez, donc je sais, je crois qu’ils en sont déjà au 11, et bon j’ai toujours du retard par rapport à ça [rires] Mais ça me convient, moi, donc tant que ça me convient et que ça marche, c’est bien.”

Nicole turned to online shopping for her knitting supplies, not out of curiosity or comfort, but because all the stores that sold yarn in her neighbourhood closed. A long experience of technological changes and cultural shifts has taught older adults that, more often than not, shiny new technology becomes obsolete in a few years, in which case all the efforts to procure it and learn to use it are a regrettable waste of time (Caradec 2001b).

Involvement in new technology depends on whether the individual is in a position to rationalize its use and imbue it with meaning. It is the phenomenon that De Schutter *et al.* (2014) identify in their analysis of the domestication of digital games by older adults. They consider older adults' play in light of Silverstone and Haddon's domestication framework and its four steps (appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion). This sheds light on the work that older adults put into integrating video games in their everyday life. As individuals acquire and learn how to play video games, they rework the meanings associated with them in a process of appropriation. For instance, a respondent bought a brain training game, only to discover that it did not fulfill its promises; so, she exchanged it for a digital version of a familiar game, mah jong, which she now plays regularly. Other participants reconsidered their initial impression that games were for children, reframing it to an activity that can be shared with their children. In turn, older adults' engagement with video games transforms the broader meanings associated with the practice. This process of conversion is impeded, in older adults' case, by the invisibility of their play in response to others' negative reactions. For similar reasons, older players often struggle to put video games on display, particularly in their households, a step of domestication described as objectification. Incorporation is less problematic: older adults find it easier to integrate video games into their time and particularly their daily lives. In sum, becoming an (older) video game player is not an overnight process, particularly in a discursive context that problematizes digital play in old age as incongruous, inappropriate, or instrumental. De Schutter *et al.* show that the reconfiguration of meanings associated with video games takes time and effort, particularly as older adults. They identify three types of meanings that older adults adopt and transform: public meanings (such as notions established by marketing campaigns or medical discourses about health benefits); pre-existing meanings (for instance, a longstanding interest in technology in all its forms); and co-constructed meanings (for example, relationships with relatives who play the same game). Pre-existing and co-constructed meanings are more stable than public meanings insofar as they better attenuate the strangeness of this troubling object.

Christina Buse (2010) proposes the term "technobiography" to describe the accumulation of technological experiences and competencies over time. Technobiographies are expressed in the embodied knowledge and techniques that each individual retains from their interactions with successive technology. Although skills are unevenly transferred from one device to another, technobiography plays a decisive role in the domestication of new technology. Buse gives the example of older women's introduction to personal computers among her respondents:

Although the majority of the participants had not used personal computers until late in their lives, many had used typewriters, and some had used word-processors or the early

mainframe computers. [...] Typewriters were most frequently mentioned as steppingstones, because they necessitated ‘familiarity with the keyboard’ and the embodied competency of touch-typing. (2010, p. 996)

In contrast, most of her respondents struggled with the use of the computer mouse, a device that had no equivalent in early computers or typewriters.

The notion of technobiography defuses the figure of the technologically helpless elderly because it emphasizes the sheer amount of technology that older adults have encountered and mastered over their lifetime. To many, formerly “new” technological devices have slowly become longstanding companions. Jacqueline started working with computers in the mid-1990s as a manager in public hospitals, got a home computer when she retired in 2000, and buys a new computer every time the previous one breaks down. Jacqueline has thus used computers continuously for about 25 years. Moreover, in Prendergast and Garratini’s words (2017:199), “[o]lder adults are frequently regarded as being at the margins of technological change, yet the later life course is filled with moments of intense learning, information sifting and flexible transition management”. Critical studies of older adults and technology call for a shift in perspective that acknowledges older adults as heterogeneously skilled but technologically competent agents (Joyce and Loe 2010). In line with this conceptualization of old age, participants’ technobiographies shed light on their diverse and rich rapport with technology. Martine watches Korean dramas on Netflix on her tablet. Nathalie used to watch TV on her smartphone. Sylvie is on her *World of Warcraft* guild’s Discord server. Philippe uses the GPS tracker of his tablet as a navigational tool when he flies his plane. Michel watches YouTube tutorials and orders tools online for his home improvement projects. Christophe reads books on his computer and gets into political debates on Facebook. Dominique and Philippe watch science YouTube videos together. Marie used to teach herself English with an app on her tablet. Jacqueline does online banking, reads *Le Figaro*, and shares photos on her WhatsApp family group.

In the *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants materialize the continuity of their technobiography by occasionally bringing their own machines to volunteers for repairs or advice or to supplement the workshop’s insufficient devices. In ten of the thirty workshops observed during the fieldwork, some participants (and in some cases all of them) came with their devices: there were 22 of them overall including 5 laptops, 7 smartphones, and 9 tablets. The number goes up to 39 if the devices that are only mentioned by participants or which they have brought to previous workshops are counted. Several coordinators mention that participants have tablets or computers: “even in *EHPADs* people have their own devices.” Participants thus introduce a veritable cornucopia of technology, old and new, into the workshops: fax machines, which perplex the volunteers in charge of troubleshooting them, e-readers, a pile of more or less smart phones, every iteration of Windows OS still in circulation, tablets of all brands, and entire boxes of cables. The presence of these already ancient devices brings into view older adults’ rich technological biography and diverse skills.

Skilled Or Clueless Seniors?

Older adults approach video game play with already-existing technology-related skills. These skills are diverse but uneven, neither standardized nor formalized. Older adults' technobiography facilitates their engagement with video games, but it remains fragmentary and incomplete. The importance of pre-existing technological uses and skills becomes particularly visible when they are absent. *Golden-Age Games* organizers count on participants' established knowledge of certain gestures (such as clicking or swiping) or concepts (for instance, that an interaction with the controller is transmitted via the sensor to the console and translates into an action onscreen and within the game). Organizers and particularly volunteers tend to assume that participants are familiar with digital interfaces, from touchscreens to controllers:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The volunteer has given a controller to a participant who has not played yet. He explains how to play: take the controller this way, keep the button engaged, swing the arm, release the button as the arm goes up. The participant makes a first attempt. The participant tells him: "Look at the screen!" The participant looks down at the controller. The participant misses a beat and says "No, the screen. The little man on the screen does whatever you are doing."

Volunteers find it difficult to explain what has come to be obvious or intuitive to them and resort to repeatedly showing participants what to do in the hopes that they will guess what they should do. This echoes Neufeldt's account of their team's experiment setting up a Wii Bowling workshop in a nursing home:

From different positive articles published in different German newspapers we were convinced of the fact that playing wii is very easy and intuitive and no problem for elderly at all. During our test session we got familiar with the handling of the wii very quickly and could only hardly imagine which problems we would face the next day. We were convinced by the fact that many elderly had played skittles, which has many parallels to bowling, in their pasts. (2009, p. 2).

The skill transfer from one technology to another takes place not only from other technology to video games but also within video games, a category that encompasses very different devices with distinct functioning. Martine explains:

The fact that I've been through all this evolution with Nintendo consoles [...] They perpetuate the whole thing. If I look at this controller here [pointing to the Switch controller] and I show you the SuperNES controller, that I have here, [she gets up and looks into the cupboard] there will be some similarities, really.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶“Le fait que j'ai eu toute ces progressions dans les consoles Nintendo. [...] Elles se perpétuent. Si je regarde cette manette là et je te montre la manette de la SuperNES, que j'ai là, [elle se lève et fouille dans le placard] il va y avoir des similitudes, quand même.”

But most older adults lack Martine's experience and struggle with implicit rules that seem obvious to many video game players and game designers.

The learning process is further complicated by the lack of formalization of ICT skills. Technological uses are often learned by doing and are not systematically and conceptually taught, particularly in adulthood. Older technology users (and users as a whole, at least before the introduction of computer science classes in the French school curriculum in the 2000s) may know how to use a device or a feature without knowing its name or the working principle behind it. Boullier notes the absence of shared conventions or trials that accompany individuals in their domestication of ICT, contrasting it with the learning environment built around the automobile that relies on national driving tests, standards of construction, and early socialization (2001). *Golden-Age Games'* participants exemplify the selective and patchy knowledge of older technology users. Their ignorance of some processes that seem basic to volunteers (such as swiping or navigating a drop-down menu) and their lack of vocabulary drive organizers to assume that participants are clueless and slow to understand new technology. The communication is further impeded by volunteers' own partial knowledge of the subject. Yet participants occasionally ask precise and pointed questions about digital technology to volunteers: how to send an image found online *via* Facebook Messenger, how to subscribe to the online version of a newspaper, or how to download a game on a tablet. These questions suggest a basic understanding of the technology and its potential uses, although it is sometimes expressed in unusual or hesitant ways.

In some cases, participants' technological queries seem almost performative:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] Four participants sit around a table in the back of the room and take turns asking a volunteer for help. They brought their own devices (tablets and smartphones). One participant asks him how to delete contacts from her Facebook account. Another asks why the name of the caller does not show up on the screen when someone calls them. A third one wants to know to forward a message on a messaging app. A participant whips out a list of questions written on a piece of paper. [...] They engage in banter with the volunteer and help each other when he is occupied elsewhere. Among themselves, they talk about relatives and shared acquaintances. [...] When volunteers announce the end of the workshop, participants pack up with no sign of distress or concern regarding the technical issues left pending.

Participants assume the role of the clueless elder in a digital literacy initiative: they understand that it is what volunteers expect of them and what is needed for the workshop to function properly. In that sense, digital illiteracy in old age is not merely an experience. It is a performance that social actors engage in, including older adults themselves.

Long And Non-Linear Video Game Careers

To older adults, video games are the latest addition to a long list of technology that they have discovered and learned to master over the course of their lives. In the domain of entertainment technology alone, interviewees mention television and transistor radio, electrical flippers and whack-a-mole games, karaoke machines, and electric keyboards. Video games in their successive iterations have appeared alongside these earlier instances of leisure technology. Rather than fully displacing them, video games coexist with pre-existing practices associated with older technology. When Christophe has insomnia, he either watches wildlife documentaries on TV or plays a game of *Candy Crush* on his phone. During her midday breaks, Nathalie watches TV series and sometimes throws in a quick game of *Capitales du Monde*.

Video games are an old “new” technology. Invented in the 1960s and commercialized from the 1970s onward in the United States, video games arrived on the French market in 1973 with bootleg copies of Pong (Montagnon & Blanchet, 2020). What was not yet called arcade cabinets were widely available in bars and cafés throughout the 1970s. Consoles took off in the late 1970s and computer games in the 1980s: the press dubbed Christmases 1977 and 1982 “Video Game Christmas” because of their spectacular sales, pointing out the emergence of video games as a mass cultural practice and consumer market. Video games are rarely entirely new to older players, even for those who have only started to play in old age. A survey of interviewees’ first encounters with video games highlights that their relationship with video games can often be traced as far back as the 1990s, thirty years ago.

Older adults’ video game biographies sometimes span several decades. For instance, Isabelle’s play biography extends all the way back to the 1980s during which she played *Donkey Kong* and *Mario Kart* on a handheld console. Her (now ex) partner, who worked in IT, bought a home computer and console and beckoned her to play with him. For a time, Isabelle played adventure games on the computer and console games nearly every night with her partner. She stopped when he took the console with him during his military service. Isabelle went back to playing board games. As her children were growing up, she let them play on the computer but refused to buy a console. Five or six years ago, Isabelle received a tablet as a gift. Her daughter downloaded a *Scrabble* game on it, and since then, she has taken to playing video games again, first on the tablet and now on her smartphone. She plays the management game *Cooking Fever* whenever she takes a break from work or rides the subway, integrating digital play into her routine. Isabelle’s trajectory exemplifies the difficulty in distinguishing between older adults who started playing video games in old age and older adults who merely continued a pre-existing practice; depending on the perspective, Isabelle has had several video game careers, the latest of which began when she was 56, or a single intermittent one that started forty years ago.

Long relationships with video games are common among older players. Martine, one of the most invested video game players in the sample, recalls that her first gaming-related memories date back to Christmas 1991. She bought *Zelda: Link to the Past* on SuperNES as a gift for her

son and watched him play for a few months. When her son left for a vacation camp in February 1992, Martine tried playing herself and has never stopped since then, moving from the SuperNES to the PlayStation and later PC gaming before going back to console games on the Nintendo Switch. Occasional video game players too can have lengthy careers. Michel almost exclusively plays 250+ *Solitaire*, a software that offers variations on the classic game. He plays for short periods in the interstices of his day and grants little importance to his play. But Michel started playing in the mid-1990s with his youngest daughter, then a child who immensely enjoyed “a game with a little dragon that bombarded stuff, etcetera, in a landscape and all that¹¹⁷”. Chantal’s career follows a similar pattern. She too came in contact with video games in the mid-1990s, watching her then-10-year-old sons play on their console. But she did not start playing at the time and waited until retirement to get into online quizzes on her smartphone. Overall, video games in old age are a matter of *temps long* rather than an outburst of novelty and modernity.

Older adults’ video game careers rarely follow a steady and linear trajectory. Firstly, the first encounter with video games rarely leads to play. Older adults typically come into contact with video games several times before trying their hand at them. There are many ways to come across video games as a non-player, from the 1980s onward: buying birthday gifts for young children, watching colleagues install games on their work computers, seeing fellow university students pass around bootleg copies of games, watching TV programs that debate the success and dangers of video games, etc. Jacqueline had a neighbour who used to work as a technician and cameraman on movie sets and had a passion for technological gadgets. He showed Jacqueline *Tetris* on his computer and she later asked her workplace’s IT manager to install *Tetris* and mah-jong games on her work computer.

The first exposure to video games can take place several years or even decades before an individual starts to play. Sylvie remembers watching her sons play when they were younger but did not find games themselves interesting at the time. Christine learned about computers during her university years but did her best to avoid any opportunity to actually use them. She stumbled back onto computers during her career as a high-school economics teacher in the mid-1980s; only then did she start playing *Solitaire* and similar games. Spouses are often instrumental in bringing video games and related technology into the home, although not necessarily in encouraging video game play. Nicole’s husband was interested in computers and bought an Amstrad in 1985; Nicole’s own interest in computers (and video games) started several years later when she started playing point’n’clicks with colleagues on their work computers. Interviewees cite several examples of relatives and friends who had material opportunities to start playing but refused to do so. Alain explains that one of his sisters is so utterly uninterested in video games that when she won a tablet at a supermarket lottery she had no idea what to do with it and donated it to her daughter. Video game play in old age is not merely a matter of information and material access to video games: nothing happens if games are not meaningful and relevant in some way to individuals’ interests.

¹¹⁷ “un jeu avec un petit dragon qui bombardait des choses, *etcetera*, dans un paysage et tout”.

Early encounters with video games nonetheless play a decisive role in individuals' eventual decision to play insofar as they constitute an opportunity to demystify the technology and build a sense of familiarity with it. Sylvie, who later started playing *World of Warcraft* on her son's suggestion and with him, remembers:

I watched them [play]. Especially the youngest one, Theo. I watched him play [*League of Legends*]. He made me laugh. [laughing] [...] And, when I was starting to hear them laugh upstairs, on the first floor, I'd come and see them, I'd sit down, I'd watch. Because I was relishing it, I was relishing seeing them enjoy themselves. It was so great.¹¹⁸

Secondly, older adults' video game career is usually made of periods of play separated by long breaks. The discontinuity of the practice stems from life course events that disrupt the techno-social organization of their play. Older adults rarely start playing video games once and for all; they often have to re-learn how to play every time they pick the practice back up. Dominique and Bernard (re)started playing video games together at three distinct points in their life. At the beginning of the interview, they attribute their discovery of video games to their youngest son but later realize that it is in fact them who got their son interested in video games. In the 1990s, they had a Mac computer on which they played *Pong* and *Doom* and “the submarines, remember, the little paratroopers that fell from the sky”. Dominique bought a personal computer very early on and started with a 1979 Olivetti for her home-based publishing business, and in the late 1980s, Bernard started buying magazines with advice and tips on how to use computers. They tried out the game programs that were included in the magazines and thus initiated their son (rather than the other way around). However, Dominique and Bernard ended up tracing their first experience with video games even earlier:

It was before, all of it, it began long before. One of my daughters, Sophie, and her young husband at the time, they bought something, *Mario*. [...] And they were completely crazy about *Mario*, they had whole evenings with their friends, and they invited us to play *Mario*. [...] That's how we saw our first video game.¹¹⁹

Dominique and Bernard's narrative of their encounter with video games is straightforward. It serves a purpose, celebrating their relationship with their son and manifesting their support for his unconventional career (compared to other relatives). Nonetheless, they are not passive recipients of their son's knowledge. Their gaming career is structured by their own choices and initiatives, resulting in a convoluted but diverse experience of video games.

¹¹⁸“Je les ai regardé. Surtout le plus jeune, Théo. Je le regardais jouer à *LoL*. Il me faisait rigoler [rires]. [...] Même, quand je les entendais commencer à rigoler tous les deux là-haut, à l'étage, je venais les voir, je m'asseyais, je regardais. Parce que je me régalais, je me régalais de les voir s'éclater. C'était trop génial.”

¹¹⁹“C'était avant, tout avant, ça a commencé bien avant. Une de mes filles, Sophie, et son jeune mari, à l'époque, ont acheté un machin qui était *Mario*. [...] Et ils étaient complètement dingues de *Mario*, ils faisaient des soirées avec les copains, et ils nous ont invité à jouer à *Mario*. [...] Mais c'est comme ça qu'on a vu le premier jeu vidéo, je crois.”

4.2. The Production Of Old Age In Digital Play

Technology constitutes a site where individuals experience the social and cultural norms and representations of old age. In that regard, older adults have an ambivalent relationship with video game play. On one hand, the attention that their play receives activates undesirable representations of old age. The first half of the section considers the ways in which video game play reinforces the perception of aging as a time of physical and cognitive decline and technological incompetence (particularly in opposition to youth). On the other, digital play lets older adults produce alternative and desirable identities. The second half of the section considers the role of video game play in keeping old age at a distance and establishing a sense of continuity with middle age.

The Spectacle Of Age-Related Losses

Video game play is a space of contested meanings in old age. Older players work out their identity and relationship with old age through their play. The choices they make within their play (in terms of genre, style, device, etc.) and the very fact that they play video games lets them project a certain image of themselves as agentive, dynamic, and playful. But video games also reinforce devalued images of old age through the framing of older adults' play as unskilled and apathetic.

Whenever older adults face difficulties in their play, their failure resonates with discourses on old age as ineluctable decline. Older players' struggles are taken as evidence and confirmation that old age is synonymous with loss – a loss of energy, learning ability, and skills. This corresponds to a medicalized perspective on aging that is common among actors in the field of aged care and older adults themselves. Martine explains:

So, I can't finish that to the end because I don't have enough, so that's precisely one of the problems we have as senior gamers, it's that we don't have all the reflexes, we can't play quickly enough for some fights. We have to train three or ten times more than young people. There are things that, we must create conditioned reflexes. It takes more time with our brains that are a little bit slower. Our bodies are slower.¹²⁰

In that sense, video game play reinforces dominant representations of old age.

Golden-Age Games events produce a continuous commentary on old age that is particularly potent because it takes place in aged care institutions, which are instrumental in stabilizing the

¹²⁰“Alors j'arrive pas jusqu'au bout parce que j'ai pas suffisamment, alors ça c'est justement un des problèmes qu'on a en tant que senior gamer, c'est qu'on n'a pas tous les réflexes, on n'arrive pas à jouer suffisamment vite pour certains combats ; Il faut qu'on s'entraîne trois fois plus ou dix fois plus que les jeunes. Il y a des choses que, il faut créer des réflexes conditionnés. Ça prend plus de temps avec nos cerveaux qui sont un petit plus lents. Nos corps sont plus lents.”

category of “the elderly” (Katz, 1996). In these spaces, the conceptualization of old age that prevails is a medical perspective that emphasizes decline, depression, and isolation. It resonates particularly well with nursing home staff and medical professionals, but also with coordinators who have a background in aged care:

[field notes from a discussion with a coordinator] The coordinator tells me that, at the beginning of the year, she gets volunteers to try on “suits that simulate old age”. Those are bodysuits that mimic the effects of hearing loss, arthritis, back pains, and so on. The point is to “put oneself into the shoes of the elderly” and get people to acknowledge the struggles associated with age-related disabilities. It works: volunteers told her “We’ll have to be kind with the grandmas and grandpas because [aging] is hard”.

The suits frame old age as first and foremost a physiological state of impairment, a universal and inescapable experience of decline and disability. They come up in several workshops as a learning experience for volunteers to empathize with older adults. In one of the video game conventions where *Golden-Age Games* has a booth, young visitors are encouraged to try one on while playing *Rocket League* or *Wii Bowling*. In some cases, coordinators ask volunteers to wear the suit to level the playing field when they play against participants, a process that defines old age and youth as different levels of physiological (and gaming) performance.

The medicalized understanding of old age as decline can create tensions:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] The leisure coordinator who sits in the front cracks jokes and mocks participants’ performances on *Wii Bowling*. When a participant throws, he tells them that they are too slow and jokes about their limited “cruising speed”. He encourages a participant by asking him to do better than the women who attend the workshop: “Show them that men are always superior!” After a while, a participant turns to her neighbour and whispers “He’s making fun of us!” quietly enough that the leisure supervisor cannot hear.

Participants themselves sometimes draw on representations of aging as decline. At the end of a workshop, a participant’s comment refers to the image of aging as decline: “We find it difficult to get up, we find it difficult to do anything.”

Playing Up Technological Incompetency

Older adults’ video game play is intertwined with expectations and representations concerning older adults’ technology skills (or lack thereof). There exists what Caradec calls a discourse of incompatibility between older adults and new technology (2001a). According to its premises, older adults are both uninterested and unable to understand technology, particularly when it comes to new technology, ICT, or digital technology. This informs the attitude of younger video game players, journalists, or *Golden-Age Games* organizers toward older adults’ play. The

unspoken question is: sure, video games are good for older adults, but are older adults any good at video games?

In the *Golden-Age Games* project, two perspectives coexist. On one hand, there are actors (often administrators or coordinators who are themselves video game players, as well as quite a few participants) who argue that older adults can become skilled players and even participate in esports competitions. *Golden-Age Games* administrators are instrumental in promoting older adults as esports players. They insist that local coordinators set up local tournaments in which teams of participants compete to win a ticket to the regional competition. They also negotiate with prominent video game conventions to host a proper esports finals:

[field notes from a regional competition] The match takes place on the big esports stage, surrounded by flashing screens, a plethora of spotlights that flash in blue and white and sweep the room, and a massive sound system that delivers a pulsating bass line. There are two commenters on stage. [...] The enthusiastic audience that sings, shouts, and waves promotional gadgets around. [...] Commenters indeed insist that “It may be the craziest esports moment you’ve ever seen in your life!”.

This context frames older adults’ play as legitimate, spectacular, and skilled play. On the other hand, some of the actors (particularly among nursing home leisure supervisors) consider that what really matters is that older adults play video games, not that they become good at it. The benefits attributed to video game play in terms of social connection or digital literacy are not correlated to in-game performance, so the latter is not a priority.

It is difficult to assess the level of proficiency of *Golden-Age Games* participants as a whole. In some workshops, participants struggle with the basic throwing movement for the entire duration of the match. In others, participants bowl a strike or a spare almost every single time. However, even in workshops where participants get very good scores (around 200 points per match), there are recurring difficulties with the A button (that participants often forget to let go) or gutter balls. These hardships stem in large part from the context of *Golden-Age Games* play. Given that the structure of the project limits participants’ access to the console to a session of one to two hours once a week (except during school holidays) for four to eight months, the context is not conducive to participants’ improvement. The Wii’s specificities also contribute to the impression that older adults struggle at playing video games. As Simon notes, the console’s sensor-based system is not entirely predictable or stable (2009). Depending on the specific space where it is set, the console reacts differently to players’ gestures:

[T]he motion of the player’s body is correlated with movements on the screen, but the relationship is not one of correspondence. A hand movement of five centimetres in the living room does not correspond to a movement of five centimetres by the player’s avatar on screen. [...] the specific relationship between the movement of the wiimote and a specific screen effect has to be learned by trial and error, and it varies from game to game. (p. 8)

Simon contrasts sensor-based consoles like the Wii to other playing devices where players can rely on the input interface's standardization:

It is nothing for a good gamer to go from house to house, keyboard to keyboard and play equally well. But the adjustment is significant for a Wii player as one moves from small screen to large screen with his body closer or further away, in a crowded space or an empty one. (p. 8-9)

Yet the difficulties that *Golden-Age Games* participants encounter are often analyzed by organizers through a medicalized understanding of aging as decline.

Interviewees put forward a similar narrative. They assert that they are not or insufficiently skilled with technology in general and video games in particular, a phenomenon they sometimes attribute to cultural and historical factors but most often to the decline of their body and brain. Nicole explains that she is not very good at *Homescapes*, the smartphone game that she plays every day, in which players solve match-3 puzzles to unlock the next chapter of a visual novel: "I'm not going fast, so, um, I'm not very far along¹²¹"; "if it gets too difficult to go on, I'll stop¹²²." She also describes herself as not very good with digital technology (although she struggles to think of an example):

Internet, it is, I'm not very good at it, but. I do my groceries, um, even the Drive, stuff like that. [...] If there is something I want to look up, well I go, I, I do it. But I don't know how to put photos [on the computer]. Putting the photos, I can do that, but then, putting them on another computer and on a USB stick. Well, I can do that too, but. There are a lot of things I don't know how to do¹²³.

Through video game play (whether in front of an audience or not), older adults actualize a devalued representation of old age. Video game play becomes a test that confirms widespread notions about older adults' inability to master new technology. Despite the growth of the silver gamer discourse that hails older players as the gamers of tomorrow, the consensus is that older adults are not good, not good enough, or less good at playing video games than other players. Even older adults who describe themselves as competent players contextualize their play in opposition to the assumed lack of skill of other older players. When Sylvie recounts her gaming career, she contrasts her rocky start ("in the beginning, I was shit at it") with her current level: "I can say that I'm doing quite well. For someone my age, I mean."¹²⁴

¹²¹"Moi j'arrive pas vite, je vais pas vite, alors donc, euh, j'en suis pas loin."

¹²²"Après si c'est trop dur à avancer, j'arrête."

¹²³"Internet, c'est, je suis pas très douée, mais bon. Je fais mes commandes, euh, même le Drive, les trucs comme ça. [...] Si j'ai un truc à rechercher, bah j'y vais, je, je le fais. Par contre je sais pas mettre les photos. Mettre les photos oui, mais après, changer d'ordinateur et mettre sur une clé USB je sais encore, ça, mais. Il y a plein de choses que je sais pas faire."

¹²⁴"Je peux dire que je me débrouille pas mal du tout. Pour quelqu'un de mon âge, quoi."

This discursive context creates an analytical fog over older adults' play, in which everything tends to be interpreted as evidence of technological incompetence or physical and cognitive frailty. Older players' difficulties are often attributed to age-related medical and biological factors (arthritis, slow reflexes, bad eyesight), even though the circumstances of older adults' play (particularly their limited access to training and learning opportunities) play a decisive role. In *Golden-Age Games* events, onlookers are quick to interpret a participant's split second of hesitation as a sign that they have forgotten how to play rather than consider other possible explanations (for instance, that the participant may have been choosing between different strategies, or they may have been distracted by the conversation of other participants nearby). Different actors interpret the same event in very different ways:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A participant who is watching others play *Wii Bowling* is making a throwing gesture (rocking her arm back and forth as if she had a controller in her hand). Someone comments: "Oh, her arm's hurting", interpreting the participant's gesture as an effort to stretch and ease the pain. But someone else answers "No, she's training!", suggesting that the participant does that to prepare for her turn on the Wii.

Overall, older players do not play as badly as their (and others') reactions suggest. Their difficulties, although notable, are significantly played up to confirm representations about technology-averse older adults.

Young Vs. Old: Conflicting Age Categories In Video Games

Video game play constitutes a space in which the notion of old age itself is constructed. As a social category, old age exists in a hierarchical and symmetrical opposition to another age group and period of life: youth. Like old age, youth is a complex identity that assigns individuals to a structural and material position of inferiority in relation to other adults and carries devalued connotations of irresponsibility or inexperience (Côté, 2014). Yet youth constitutes a valued cultural referential in contemporary societies: images of youth have come to signify energy, creativity, and open-mindedness. The devalued significations associated with old age find their counterpart in the qualities attributed to youth.

The importance and value of youth are regularly referenced by older adults and the actors who participate in their play. Organizers assert that older people enjoy being with young adults and children (with the implication that they prefer it to the company of other older adults). This culminates in organizers' assumption that participants only play video games because they want to spend time with young people: video games are "a pretext", "an excuse". A coordinator explains that participants prefer tablets to consoles because tablets allow them to spend one-on-one time with a volunteer. Meanwhile, participants state matter-of-factly that volunteers must resent having to spend time with old people. A participant asks a volunteer about their

experience with the civic service and comments that being with “old people”, “since you’re young, it can’t be fun”.

Video game play constitutes an arena where the opposition between youth and old age is performed and reinforced. The comparison of old age and youth is deeply intertwined with the performance of technological incompetency in old age. Technology crystallizes the symbolical contrast between old age and youth. Martine plays the same game as her grandson and interprets the differences in their play as an allegory of youth and old age:

So [my grandson], he bought, his mom bought him his Switch, with the *Zelda*. He picked a game up, he finished everything, and in expert mode [laughing] and all that, yadda yadda. He’s eleven, see, so that’s easier for him.¹²⁵

It also anchors representations of old age in a biological and natural framework that reifies age categories. Dominique considers that for her grandchildren “of course, video games are still, let’s say that the youngest ones are 5 or 6. But so for them, video games are part of their natural environment.¹²⁶” Alain concurs: “While for children, I can see with my youngest daughter that well, using a touchscreen, it isn’t a problem. For people who are older, it’s sometimes impossible.¹²⁷” This lets social actors construct older players as an essentialized category marked by its inferiority. Martine uses strong words to separate herself from “normal gamers”:

[My son] bought me that game, the *Xenoblade Chronicles II*, where I’ve never managed to understand. So here’s a thing about seniors. Even normal people who play video games [laughing], normal gamers, let’s say, struggle with the fights. Me, I’ve never even managed to understand how to fight in this game.¹²⁸

Nonetheless, this conceptualization of youth is not entirely positive: youth is associated with technological proficiency, but also with excessive and inappropriate technology uses. Older adults tend to be critical toward teenagers and young adults’ video game play, online presence, and communication practices, mirroring young people’s disdain toward older adults’ technology uses, which they describe as uninformed and incomplete (Comunello *et al.*, 2020). These judgments reflect wider discourses on old age and youth and socially situated norms concerning technology. For instance, cell phone use is an arena of negotiations between grandparents and their grandchildren because of their divergence in terms of expectations and norms concerning communication (Sawchuk & Crow, 2012). A similar pattern comes up in

¹²⁵ “Alors [mon petit-fils], il s’est acheté, sa mère lui a acheté sa Switch, avec le *Zelda*. Il a repris un jeu, il a tout fini, et en mode expert [rires], et tout, machin. Il a onze ans quoi donc c’est plus facile pour lui.”

¹²⁶ “Oui, donc avec eux, forcément, le jeu est quand même, disons que les derniers ils ont 5-6 ans. Mais donc pour eux le jeu fait vraiment partie de leur environnement naturel.”

¹²⁷ “Autant les enfants, je vois avec ma dernière fille que bon, utiliser un écran tactile ça pose pas de problèmes. Pour des personnes plus âgées, quelque fois c’est impossible.”

¹²⁸ “Il m’a acheté ça, le *Xenoblade Chronicles II*, où j’ai jamais réussi à comprendre. Alors voilà un truc pour les seniors. Déjà les gens normaux qui jouent aux jeux vidéo [rires], les gamers normaux, on va dire, ont du mal avec les combats. Moi j’ai toujours pas réussi à comprendre comment il fallait combattre là-dedans.”

discourses about video game play, with young adults characterizing older players as unskilled and older adults criticizing young players' impetuous play and violent games.

Furthermore, older adults' actual play and skills regularly clash with organizers' expectations. It is particularly the case when players land a throw that volunteers predicted would fail, when participants win against volunteers during a match, and when participants who are among the oldest and/or have disabilities have the best scores in the group. While organizers and participants alike expect participants to be unskilled and volunteers to be naturally good at playing video games, the situation is more nuanced in practice. Volunteers are not as comfortable with digital technology and play as others imagine. The few technology and computer science classes that they attended throughout middle school and high school were not consistently offered and only covered basic knowledge. A significant number of volunteers struggle with setting up the Wii console or filling in the monthly spreadsheets. Coordinators and other organizers are surprised by volunteers' patchy knowledge of digital technology:

[field notes from a conversation with a coordinator] The coordinator tells me that, in fact, the volunteers are not very good with digital technology. They know how to use their smartphones, but not the computers, professional software (she means Excel and Google Agenda), or emails. They even struggle with tablets. The coordinator made sure to hire volunteers who were comfortable with digital technology, but even those volunteers struggle. The coordinator adds that her volunteers are still familiar with the Wii, they're the right generation; but in three or four years, she'll have even more volunteers who have never played on a Wii.

Another coordinator indeed had to teach volunteers how to play the Wii because (to her astonishment) several volunteers had never used one. Some volunteers do not play video games at all, and those who do rarely play exergames or use the (now discontinued) Wii console. As a result, although they are better equipped to learn, volunteers are not necessarily more experienced than the participants they have to teach.

In this context, the reinforcement of specific representations of old age relies on a collective effort to produce interpretations that reconcile older adults' play with expectations of low performance and volunteers' interventions with expectations of technological proficiency. The actors involved in the workshops will either ignore events that go against their expectations or frame them as freak incidents. This is notably the case every time that participants play against volunteers and win:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] Two volunteers play a match of *Wii Bowling* against two participants. The match lasts for a while and the scores are close but the participants are clearly ahead. One of the volunteers is amused at first, then increasingly distraught: "They're about to win us even though we're playing on the Wii!", "The worst part is, we're playing very seriously", "I think we're about to lose, I'm going to cry", and then "Normally it's us who should be winning..."

Participants attempt to comfort volunteers throughout the game and conclude that their win proves that volunteers are excellent teachers, but volunteers still undeniably lose face when they lose a game against older adults.

Video Games As A Break From Old Age

Video games carry devalued representations of old age, but they also allow older to contest or nuance them. Every instance of progress and success within the game chips away at notions of older adults' technological incompetency. Sylvie conforms to the values of "hardcore gaming" when she presents herself as someone who enjoys challenges and difficulty: "And they're not very easy, the games I play. Because there are others that are a bit, um, there's too much help. [...] I don't like it when there's help. I don't want any help."¹²⁹ Older players can count on the very fact that they play video games (even if they're not very good at it) to undermine assumptions about the conservativeness and reticence of the elderly. They are also quick to note that younger players and technology users face the same problems that they do. Sylvie points out that cluelessness is not a matter of age:

On the game I play, I am with young people, mostly, from 17 to about 50 years old, and I realize that people in general, whether they're young or old, don't know how to find information, um, on their own.¹³⁰

In a pattern reminiscent of the opposition between third and fourth age, older players use their practice to distinguish themselves from the most devalued images of old age. According to them, individuals who engage in such a technologically complex and fundamentally youthful activity cannot be conflated with the "really old" who stare at a TV all day. With video games, older adults recreate a boundary between dynamic seniors and the frail elderly and position themselves on the right side of this divide. This distinction provides an *ad hoc* solution to older adults who seek to distance themselves from the Otherness of old age:

Technical innovations are symbols of modernity, and we know that some uses can be explained by the fear to be out of it, to fall behind. [...] From that perspective, the relationship with technological devices can be analyzed as a means of social integration, or even – the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive – as a mark of status, a sign of belonging to a "third age" still young, active and dynamic, and a sign of distinction from the "fourth age" and old age. (Caradec 1999:72, my own translation)

¹²⁹"Et ils sont pas très faciles, ceux auxquels je joue. Parce qu'il y en a d'autres qui sont un peu, euh, où il y a trop d'aide. [...] Moi j'aime pas quand il y a des aides. J'en veux pas, de l'aide."

¹³⁰"Sur le jeu sur lequel je joue, je suis avec des jeunes, essentiellement, à partir de 17 ans jusqu'à une cinquantaine d'années, et je me rends compte que les gens en général, qu'ils soient jeunes ou plus vieux, ne savent pas s'informer, euh, par eux-mêmes."

As Iversen (2016:17) notes, “digital games become one of the available means both for society and for the individual to escape the unpleasant perspectives of the fourth age.”

Older adults who play video games get to define themselves as playful, impetuous, and other characteristics associated with youthfulness. Several interviewees present their current video game play as the result of their lifelong love for play, framed here as a fundamental personality trait that pervades their whole life and reveals their inherent youthfulness. Sylvie says that “I am, in my mind, I’m aware of that, a small kid. [...] Ah yes, I’m not rigid at all, really. I, I like messing about.¹³¹” Christine defines herself as fundamentally playful: “I’m very playful, I am. [laughing] [...] Yes, yes, yes, I’ve always played a lot in my life.¹³²” Alain frames his interest in digital technology as the logical consequence of his curiosity and enthusiasm: “Here it is, I’m very, otherwise I’m someone who is insatiably curious. So I’m interested in a lot of things.¹³³” They propose an alternative way to inhabit old age that is not about decline. Some even draw on the association of video games with youth to reclaim old age as a second childhood. This strategy has been described by Barrett & Naiman-Sessions in their study of the Red Hat Society, a social group that encourages older women to act like “silly old women” (2016). Red Hatters intentionally perform behaviours associated with childhood such as playing dress-up and pajama parties to subvert negative stereotypes, reclaim a right to leisure, and become visible in the public space. Play is a critical element in this strategic reference to old age as “second childhood”, a phenomenon that Hockey & James have also observed in nursing homes “as a deliberate subversive strategy” (*in* Featherstone & Wernick, 1995, p. 144). In an argument that echoes the position of the Red Hat Society and their reclaiming of a liberating second childhood, Martine declares: “I don’t understand, I don’t understand people, so-called adults, who are often more grown-ups than adults. I am an adult, really, but fuck it if I’m not having fun!¹³⁴” Video games have the potential not only to circumvent but also to subvert devalued representations of old age.

A Sense Of Continuity

Video games are not merely vehicles for stigmatizing representations of old age. They also constitute spaces and resources for older adults to negotiate the way they inhabit old age. The social reconfiguration and devaluation that accompanies old age is a challenge for aging individuals. Caradec proposes to conceptualize the social experience of old age as a series of trials (*épreuves*) during which individuals struggle with the assignment to a degraded identity of “old person” (2012). Yvette gives a rich and reflexive account of this process. Addressing

¹³¹“Moi je suis, dans ma tête, j’ai un côté, j’en suis consciente, un petit enfant. [...] Ah oui, je suis pas rigide du tout, moi. Je, j’aime bien la déconnade, quoi.”

¹³²“Je suis très joueuse, moi [rires]. [...] Oui oui oui, j’ai toujours aimé ça, j’ai toujours beaucoup joué dans ma vie.”

¹³³“Voilà, je suis très, autrement je suis quelqu’un qui est curieux de manière insatiable. Donc je m’intéresse à beaucoup de choses.”

¹³⁴“Moi je comprends pas, je comprends pas les gens, les soit-disant adultes, d’ailleurs qui ne sont souvent pas adultes, qui sont souvent plus des grandes personnes que des adultes. Moi je suis une adulte, une vraie, mais putain, je me marre, quoi”.

me directly, she begins: “I think that, by asking me those questions, you’ve given me an importance, an importance I don’t have anymore. [...] As a, as an “old woman” [laughing].” Yvette makes the connection between her brutal entry into the category of “old person” and her move to a residence for senior citizens: “I feel like there’s been a shift, at least from my daughter, I feel like since I’ve been here she’s been treating me a bit like a granny, well.” Yvette correlates feeling old with being treated as an inferior: “my daughter, I found that she had become much more authoritative with me, when it wasn’t the case before, well. So I’m feeling like in her eyes, I have become old, see [laughing]”¹³⁵.

In response, older adults adopt discursive practices that distance them from the dreaded fourth age and engage in activities that prolong, protect, or renew more gratifying social roles. Continuity is a core preoccupation. It is the Othering effect of old age that aging individuals take issue with, that is, the assumption that bodily changes indicate a degradation of the self and its integrity. Consequently, older adults are rarely looking to reinvent themselves in old age and instead value activities that evidences the fact that they are still the same person:

[f]or as long as possible, aging individuals prefer to define themselves at a distance from the stigmatized identity of “old” in which they refuse to let themselves be confined. They then draw on very diverse elements (an activity that they continue to engage in, relatively good health, undamaged intellectual abilities, an unchanged personality, continued interest in the news, etc.) to establish continuity with their past. (Caradec 2009, my own translation)

Two spaces play a strategic role in that regard: leisure and technology. On one hand, video games participate in a broader phenomenon in which leisure takes an increasing importance in older adults’ lives. Henricks and Cutler (2003) argue that leisure and particularly play are powerful instruments in the creation and maintenance of one’s sense of identity and social role over time (2003). It becomes critical in old age because this stage of the life course is disrupted by abrupt changes and discontinuity in social roles. Henricks and Cutler argue that

Leisure embodies the contention that it is through play, in one form or another, that all of us, and not just children, find relatively low-risk opportunities to try out alternative self-concepts, modes or styles of interaction, personas, capabilities, and competencies. (p. 115)

It provides older adults with opportunities to reinforce specific notions about themselves (such as being active, strong, generous, good with children) in their own eyes and the eyes of others. The strategic importance of leisure comes up in interviewees’ accounts. Meaningful leisure

¹³⁵“Je pense que, si vous voulez, en me posant toutes ces questions, vous m’avez donné de l’importance, une importance que je n’ai plus. [...] En tant que “vieille” [rires].” ; “Moi j’ai l’impression qu’il y a eu un basculement, en tout cas de la part de ma fille, j’ai l’impression que depuis que je suis ici, elle me traite un peu en mémère, enfin.” ; “Je trouve que, ma fille, j’ai trouvé qu’elle était devenu beaucoup plus autoritaire avec moi, alors que c’était pas le cas avant, voilà. Alors j’ai l’impression que j’ai pris à ses yeux, j’ai pris de l’âge, quoi [rires].”

activities allow individuals to perform or embody the traits that they value most in themselves. In the absence of other valued social roles related to labour or family, these activities are so critical that interviewees are ready to make sacrifices to protect them, as does Sylvie when her children tell her that she cannot afford her current house with a small garden and should move to an apartment:

That's out of the question, that's the only, that's my only luxury, that's the only thing that, um. In terms of morale, gives me a will to live, to go on. So it's stupid. I prefer doing without a lot of things, not enjoying any vacation, not buying any clothes, in fact it's been a while since I've bought any. No books either, I go to the library. I buy nothing for myself, in fact. But my garden is really sacred to me. It's very important for my mental, my morale.¹³⁶

Overall, leisure supports the establishment of a narrative that organizes an individual's experiences, interests, and values into a coherent flow.

On the other, technology plays an ambivalent role in the preservation of a meaningful everyday life in old age. It can either support or shatter the sense of continuity that aging individuals struggle to maintain. The adoption of new technology is a potential source of destabilization, particularly when it is imposed rather than chosen. Because the experience of everyday life is mediated through technology, identities and social roles are embedded in specific devices and uses (Jouët, 2003). Consequently, technological changes disrupt the habitual ways in which individuals inhabit their position in the social world (Caradec 1999). The repercussions are further intensified by the meanings that technology carries. Older adults' general avoidance of gerontechnology illustrates this phenomenon. Because gerontechnology is designed for older adults and specifically as a solution to the problems associated with old age, devices such as alarm pendants or connected tablets for seniors highlight their users' limitations, subsume them to their age, and evoke images of disability, frailty, and dependency (Dominguez-Rué and Nierling 2016). Consequently, older users have an uncertain relationship with gerontechnology. The literature abounds with examples of older adults refusing or intentionally forgetting to use gerontechnology and medical technology: hiding blood pressure monitors in cupboards (Lassen *et al.*, 2015), hanging a "panic button" pendant beside the bed rather than wearing it (Gomez, 2015), agreeing to test a care robot but refusing to take it home (Neven, 2011). Such devices have the potential to undo older adults' work to maintain a sense of continuity and coherence throughout old age. Yet this tension is softened by older adults' ability to devise creative adaptations of problematic devices and domesticate burdensome technology (Joyce and Loe 2010).

¹³⁶“Ça c'est hors de question, c'est la seule, c'est mon seul luxe, c'est la seule chose qui, euh. Moralement, me donne envie de vivre, de continuer. Donc c'est idiot. Je préfère passer sur plein de choses, ne pas me payer de vacances, ne pas me payer d'habits, d'ailleurs ça fait un bail que je m'en suis pas payés. Pas de bouquins non plus, je vais à la médiathèque. Je m'achète rien, en fait. Mais mon jardin c'est vraiment sacré. C'est très important pour mon mental, pour mon moral.”

Technology's acceptability depends on its capacity to support a sense of continuity for older users. Gucher proposes the metaphor of technology as either a cane or a window-breaking hammer: it can support older adults' engagement with the world around them and allow them to continue activities that were becoming inaccessible; or it can forcibly break into older adults' lives to save them, damaging their environment and making their frailty visible to all in the process (2012):

In both cases, the movement of acceptance or rejection that older adults express can be understood as a show of autonomy and an assertion of the categorical imperative to preserve their identity, in a perspective of continuity in the arrangements and meanings of old age that they establish. (2012, p. 37, my own translation)

This logic extends beyond gerontechnology and assistive technology. For instance, nursing home residents use media and communication technology in order to domesticate life in a total institution (Swane, 2018). They re-create personal worlds within the medical world of the nursing home by sleeping with the radio on, listening to their favourite music while they fall asleep, or intently watching TV news to maintain their role as informed citizens who are still concerned by what goes on outside of the institution's walls. Autonomy and continuity are priorities for residents, who combine assistive technology and media to maintain their routines of reading, listening to music, or communicating with loved ones. Older adults find identity-making resources in various technological devices, particularly when they have engaged with these devices willingly and on their own terms, as is the case for video games in the case of interviewees.

Video games have the potential to represent continuity rather than rupture for older players. Although some interviewees associate video games with an upheaval of their leisure habits, most interviewees frame them as the logical continuation of other practices such as crossword puzzles or knitting. De Schutter *et al.* find a similar pattern in their study on the domestication of video games in old age:

For these respondents, digital games support meaningful topics such as a passion for aviation, history, the military, sports, or even being a fan of certain television game shows. In these cases, the content of digital games tended to be a reflection of activities and topics that were already a meaningful part of life (2014, p. 7).

Among the older players I have met, Philippe makes the connection between video games and a passion for planes that started in childhood:

So you have the connection between my main leisure activity, building planes, and the flight simulator, which is also a way to, well, take flying in, or well the, let's say a thing that pertains to planes on every level.¹³⁷

Yvette navigates back and forth between her sudoku app on the tablet and her sudoku book (as well as occasional sudokus on the computer) and describes them as the two sides of the same activity. For Nathalie, word games and quizzes on her phone complete a longstanding interest in pen-and-paper crosswords and board games, which she continues to engage in occasionally with her employers or her husband. Overall interviewees situate their video game play as an offshoot of their interest in one of four topics: new technology, play, and to a lesser extent literature.

To those older adults who have watched the advent of computer and digital technology with great interest, video games are merely one stage in a lifetime of acquiring and tinkering with the latest electronic gadgets. Digital play is situated within a biographical trajectory that also includes computer programming, image editing, or 3D printing. Longstanding interest in technology and tinkering with devices is a heavily gendered practice, as interviewees illustrate. Several women are quite invested in digital technology and particularly playing devices, and the two self-identified gamers in the sample are Martine and Sylvie. But only men (including one who did not work in engineering in any capacity) express an interest in hardware and have a history of tinkering with gadgets and setups: Philippe, Christophe, and Alain. Philippe, who used to work as an engineer in electronics, built his first computer himself. Six months before the interview, Philippe modified his setup to be able to play flight simulators in Virtual Reality: he bought and installed a VR headset and ordered connected controllers that mimic actual plane controls. Philippe also took to programming his own missions in *Digital Combat Simulator*. These older players signal that their interest in new technology has not dwindled over time and that they remain the same person as they were in middle age, before they entered the depersonalizing social category of old age. They also perform a valued identity (techie, geek, computer specialist) that partly compensates for the devalued identity of “old person”. It is the case for Alain whose computer classes in the local cultural centre position him as a tech specialist and somewhat compensate for his “great regret, really”: in the 1970s, when he left university, “I didn’t imagine for a single minute that [computer science] could be a professional career. It’s a shame because I could easily have pursued a Ph.D. program.”¹³⁸

Older adults can also frame video games as the continuation of a lifelong passion for play. This sets video games as a fundamental part of who they are and what matters to them. Marie defines herself as a fundamentally playful person: “So as I told you, I am a player, in quotation marks. [...] Since forever. That means that for instance, I was the fourth player in *belote* with my father

¹³⁷“Donc tu as le lien entre mon loisir principal, qui est l’avion, la construction amateur d’avion, et puis le simulateur de vol, qui est une façon aussi de, voilà, d’appréhender le pilotage, ou enfin la, on va dire un truc en relation avec l’aviation à tous les niveaux.”

¹³⁸“J’ai pas imaginé un seul instant que ça pouvait être une voie professionnelle. C’est dommage, parce que j’aurais pu faire un doctorat facilement.”

and grandfather when they were missing a fourth.¹³⁹” For Jacqueline, a specific game has come to represent the identity of her family: “We’ve played *Scrabble*. We play *Scrabble* as a family. We always play *Scrabble* as a family.” Later, she adds: “So you see it’s been a family passion, *Scrabble*, it still is”: “When we all meet up [my daughter] wants me to play with her sons. Who are starting to enjoy it.” Other games are part of the family lore: “ping pong is in the life of the whole family, there are a table and players in every home”, and “mah-jong, real mah-jong, as a family, guided by our parents. [...] Irène still has the box, and the sandalwood still smells just as good after over a century.¹⁴⁰”

Alternatively, older adults position video games as an expression of their interest in literature and fiction. Several interviewees specifically mention science fiction as a precursor of their play, even when the genres they play do not feature elements that directly evoke science fiction. Martine makes a connection between different media and different stages of her leisure trajectory:

And I’ve always been, since the age of twelve, I’ve immersed myself in science fiction, etc. And I could find in the tools I had at my disposal [in video games] things that I’d seen in *Fleuve Noir* science fiction novels [laughing] that I read when I was twelve.¹⁴¹

In summary, older adults seize video games as identity resources. Firstly, they imbue the practice with meanings that support their identity and protect their sense of self in old age. Video games allow individuals to maintain or renew their engagement with activities that are particularly meaningful to them. Secondly, older adults use their video game practice to further positive meanings of old age. Through their play, they build desirable alternatives to the roles of “successfully aging senior” and “frail old wo/man”. In all these cases, the integration of video games into a continuous life story serves to protect and reinforce older adults’ sense of self that the social experience of old age threatens.

¹³⁹“Alors je l’ai dit, je suis entre guillemets joueuse. [...] Depuis tout le temps. C’est à dire que je faisais par exemple déjà la quatrième à la belote avec mon père et mon grand-père quand il manquait un quatrième larron.”

¹⁴⁰“On a joué au *Scrabble*. On joue au *Scrabble* en famille. Nous jouons toujours au *Scrabble* en famille.” “Donc vous voyez c’était une passion familiale le *Scrabble*, ça l’est toujours.” “quand nous nous retrouvons tous Florence a envie que je joue avec ses fils. Qui commencent à aimer ça.” “Le ping pong est dans la vie de toute la famille, il y a une table et des joueurs dans chaque maison.” “Le mah-jong, le vrai en famille, guidés par nos parents. [...] Irène a le coffret et le bois de santal après plus d’un siècle sent toujours aussi bon.”

¹⁴¹“Et puis j’ai toujours été, dès l’âge de douze ans j’ai plongé dans la science fiction, etc. Et je retrouvais dans les outils qu’on mettait à ma disposition des choses que j’avais vues dans les romans de science fiction “Fleuve Noir” [elle rit] que je lisais quand j’avais douze ans.”

4.3. Constraints And *Bricolage* With The Aging Body

Older adults' play is embedded in their relationship with the aging body. Old age is a cultural and social phenomenon, not merely a matter of biology or medicine, but it is also a profoundly embodied experience of change and difference that takes a variety of forms. This matters in older adults' digital play insofar as older players have to reconcile the aging body (a body with changing abilities, but also a marginalized body) with video games. The process, which requires flexibility and creativity, reflects older adults' complex relationship with technology.

Rigid Scripts And Unruly Users: An STS Perspective On Older Video Game Players

Science & Technology Studies have become a cornerstone of critical studies of aging, as three recent books illustrate. Joyce and Loe (2010:1) argue that Science & Technology Studies are particularly relevant in contemporary societies where aging is conceptualized as a biomedical problem, insofar as “[s]cience and technology are central to the lived experiences and normative definitions of health and illness for ageing people.” Domínguez-Rué & Nierling (2016) examine technology as a vector of discipline and norms in old age but also as a resource in older adults' efforts to maintain agency and autonomy. For their part, Peine *et al.* (2021) propose a sociogerontechnological perspective that weaves together considerations about design, care for technology, technological devices as actants, and redefinitions of aging through technology. Central themes in Science & Technology studies emerge throughout the critical literature on technology and aging, which calls attention to power struggles, norms and scripts, and bricolage and agency in older adults' technology uses.

Individuals age in and through technology insofar as old age is inscribed in its scripts and enacted in its uses. Peine and Neven's (2021) Co-constitution of Ageing and Technology (CAT) model considers four arenas in which the relationship between individuals and devices produces a certain experience of old age. Images of aging establish certain representations of older adults as technology users (“reluctant”, “unskilled”, “conservative”). These are reinterpreted and reinforced in design worlds where different actors collaborate to produce technological devices for older adults. As a result, technology carries scripts that implement specific representations and expectations about old age. These scripts are implemented, negotiated, and challenged by older adults as they integrate said technology into their life worlds. The CAT model brings to light the importance of technology in the experience of old age, but also the instability that results from conflicts among designers, shifting images of aging, the intervention of technology as an actant, and users' agency.

Age is embedded in technological scripts that become particularly visible in moments of tension such as negotiations between designers and users. The design of new devices tends to revolve around a theoretical user that is often defined (among other things) as a young person, a choice that creates barriers for users who do not fit designers' expectations. Alternatively, in the case

of technology designed with older users in mind, designers work around a figure of the “senior” that clashes with older adults’ actual uses and perception of themselves. In her study of a design process for Ambient Assisted Living devices, Endter (2016) shows that engineers’ assumptions about older adults’ skills and needs clash with older testers’ feedback. Lafontaine and Sawchuk (2021) make a similar demonstration regarding Montreal’s consultation on age-friendly cities, whose implementation contrasts with its objectives: in practice, the emphasis on online communication excluded many older adults, particularly those living in poverty.

Yet, as these studies also note, older adults are not passive victims of technological design. While “we should be careful not to replace a technological deterministic view by a romantic voluntarism which celebrates the agency of users” (Oudshoorn, Rommas, and Stienstra 2004:55), they retain some degree of control in their relationship with technology by adjusting problematic scripts and sometimes substantially subverting expected uses. Examples include the older members of a hospital-sponsored walking group who collectively ignored the pedometers provided by the hospital because the emphasis these devices put on competition and performance was incompatible with their interest in sociality and conversation (Copelton 2010) or the respondent who walks around the house with his cordless phone in his pocket to reconcile his hearing loss with his rejection of cell phones (Caradec 1999). Joyce and Loe (2010) propose the concept of technogenarian to draw attention to the dialectics between technology’s disciplinary potential in old age and older adults’ ingenious accommodations of technology. In that sense “[e]lders creatively utilise technological artifacts to make them more suitable for their needs even in the face of technological design and availability constraints” (p. 1).

Nonetheless, as a general rule, technology is unevenly amenable to users’ readjustments:

A mortar bomb, for example, might conceivably be used as a door stop, but for little more than its intended purpose; whereas a hammer can be used to kill someone, to bang nails into wood, or to mend a car. (Mackay and Gillespie 1992:702)

In that regard video games are relatively rigid, and some devices (like consoles) prove particularly uncompromising. Yet some instances of creative diversions find their way into older adults’ video game play, often in relation to the complex relationship between video games and the aging body.

The Hypervisibility Of Aging Bodies In Digital Play

The emphasis that video game play puts on the player’s body has particularly strong implications for older players. The experience of aging is grounded in the body and its changes (Gilleard and Higgs 2014). It is a site of conflict between self, body, and society wherein the physical traces of old age put the individual at odds with an unchanging sense of self and untenable expectations about the successful way to perform old age (Schwaiger 2006). The visible and embodied process of aging threatens the individual in their ability to maintain their

identity and former social role while also triggering social and cultural marginalization (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). The critical role of the body in old age does not imply that aging is an entirely biological process. Individuals have diverse corporeal experiences of aging and rely on various strategies to manage them on their own terms. Nonetheless, aging is an experience in which the body is central and inescapable; moreover, individuals experience the social and cultural meanings of aging in embodied ways, if only because dominant discourses of aging relentlessly call attention to the body, either in terms of exceptionalism or (most often) decline (Joyce and Loe 2010; Gilleard and Higgs 2014).

Digital play also places the body front and center. Video games mobilize the body in affective and visceral ways: “it is a subrational, bodily thing as well, involving phenomenological or affective dimensions that cannot be programmed into a game, but which are nonetheless vital to gameplay” (Shinkle 2005:22). Thornham (2011) shows that gaming is a “lived praxis” in which the player’s body articulates a narrative and memory of play, as illustrated by her respondents’ ability to reconstruct entire gaming sessions just from looking at videos of themselves playing.

The body is particularly central for older players. They see their bodies take up significant amounts of space, sometimes to the point of becoming invasive, in their play. In old age, technological devices often stop fading in the background of everyday life and become uncomfortably visible: either they become more difficult to use them as physical abilities change or they stand out because they are obsolete, medical, or incongruous in an older adult’s home (Swane 2018). Both patterns are true in older video game players’ case. Additionally, the silver gamer discourse draws attention to the older player’s body as a project that is maintained and enhanced through playful uses of technology. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants are treated first and foremost as aging bodies in need of care and exercise. The training sessions that local coordinators set up for volunteers emphasizes the embodied dimension of old age, for instance with age-simulation suits. It is telling that the *Golden-Age Games* project includes one branch that offers video game workshops to disabled (young) people. In a major video game convention where *Golden-Age Games* has a booth, the convention organizers have positioned the association next to an initiative that campaigns for disabled players and better accessibility in video games.

The aging body is further emphasized by the choice of games featured in the *Golden-Age Games* workshops. Motion-activated consoles like the Wii and exergames like *Wii Bowling* shift the focus from the screen to the physical space, bodies, and gestures necessary for play (Simon 2009). Rather than defining the player’s body as an obstacle to immersion, devices like the Wii console bring to the fore the kinaesthetic experience of play, a logic reminiscent of 1980s’ fantasies about virtual reality in video games. Marketing campaigns call attention to the body and its performance rather than the screen. Because of the console’s setup and design, players are continually aware of their bodies in relation to the game, the screen, the sensors, the play space and the objects within it. Furthermore, exergames and consoles that allow motion-controlled play have an important place in the discourses that celebrate the health benefits of

video games. Exergames, Wiis, and Kinects are the devices of choice in the medical literature on older adults and play: they embody the promises of the silver gamer discourse about virtuous and productive play, easing the anxiety around the figure of the lazy “couch potato” gamer (e.g. Larsen *et al.* 2013; Webster and Celik 2014). In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, this takes the form of frequent comparisons between *Wii Bowling* and sports. Organizers make the connection between digital play and various types of exercise and sports: bowling, *pétanque*, but also billiard, frisbee, and even football. A participant leaves the workshop with the comment “Well I did my exercise for the day.” On stage during the regional competition, a commentator gushes: “This absolute focus in their eyes, that’s what I love. That’s how you know they’re high-level athletes.”

The *Golden-Age Games* workshops are full of movement. The Wii console demands some sort of motion from the player and participants display various types of physical involvement. They compose with their changing bodies and evolving abilities in terms of perception, prehension, or balance. Each participant, sometimes with the suggestion or assistance of organizers, finds a way: sitting down, swinging the controller between one’s legs rather than on the side, or standing up to throw, and then sitting down. Participants wield their controller around, sometimes with grand gestures and sometimes with more controlled but sharp movements, often with a sigh or an exclamation afterwards:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] When it is their turn, participants come up to the front and stand in front of the console. They make one small step backward and then a big step forward when they make the throwing gesture, which it often so wide that they take an additional step forward for balance. Sometimes they punctuate the gesture by exhaling or crying “Ha!”. They watch the ball’s trajectory on the screen intently, comment on it (with a remark on their strategy for the next throw, a satisfied grunt, or a resounding “Fuck!”, for instance), then turn around and march back to their chair unless they have another throw to make.

Play in the workshop is neither immobile nor silent. A frequent configuration has volunteers setting up chairs in a line or grid, with participants sitting while they wait for their turn and coming to the front when it is their turn to play. This lets each participant make their throw right in front of the sensor rather than at an angle. There is often a chair in the playing spot because most participants sit to play. Additionally, participants move around the room and come and go from one activity to another. The spaces of workshops feature diverse relationships with the body and complex choreography:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] There are a lot of participants in front of the Wii: fourteen at the moment, including five people in wheelchairs and two people with walking aids. The setup is organized like a square: one side of the square has the Wii and the TV, and the other three sides are made of three rows of chairs. Volunteers call the participant whose turn it is to play, and often help them come to the front of the Wii, then get them back to their chair. However, things are a little chaotic: volunteers

run around the square to make sure that each turn doesn't take too long, so some participants end up walking or wheeling themselves from their seat and back, and others just stay in the middle of the square instead of going back to their chair. People stop in their tracks to chat with the people around them or to watch a particularly good throw. As a result, the space is saturated and people bump into each other (but the atmosphere is joyful, not stressful). When the square gets too full, people move around or even outside of it to make room. People moving haphazardly, in different directions and at different speeds: it looks like some sort of technological ballet.

Even the calmest workshops have participants and organizers moving around. The murmur of conversations, the late arrival of new participants, the coming and going of organizers to get one thing or another, the energetic gestures of players, the constant getting up and sitting down gets bodies moving in and around the game.

“The More I Would Insist, The More It Would Hurt.” Playing Against The Aging Body

Digital play brings older adults face to face with the changes and inflexibility of their bodies. Older players experience video game play as a frustrating struggle against a rigid and recalcitrant body. In interviewees' stories, digital play happens despite (rather than with) their bodies, its abilities and habits. Martine, cited earlier, explicitly incriminates the aging body: “It takes more time with our brains that are a little bit slower. Our bodies are slower.¹⁴²” For Alain, some genres (here First-Person Shooters and “war games”) are incompatible with older adults' intrinsic and embodied reactions:

And it's quite funny because young people, in these games, they rush headlong into it, even if they get killed right away, they rush and rush. While adults, let's say, they have a more collected attitude, they think it through, they try to set up a strategy. And it's really quite funny, and of course it's more the young ones who win, because that type of game is more amenable to their behaviour than to ours.¹⁴³

Golden-Age Games workshops explicitly revolve around the difficult encounter between rigid machines and rigid bodies that cannot easily adapt to each other. By design, video games are unforgiving: players can only win (and in many cases, they can only play) if they conform to the game's expectations, which are hard-coded in the software and hardware. In *Golden-Age Games* events, this means that players have to discipline their bodies into giving in to the console's demands. If they throw their ball too late one too many times, a pop-up appears on

¹⁴²“Ça prend plus de temps avec nos cerveaux qui sont un petit plus lents. Nos corps sont plus lents.”

¹⁴³“Et c'est très amusant parce que les jeunes dans ces jeux-là ils foncent tête baissée quitte à se faire tuer tout de suite, ils foncent ils foncent alors que les adultes, on va dire, eux ont une attitude plus posée, ils réfléchissent, ils essaient de mettre au point une stratégie. Et c'est très très amusant, et évidemment c'est plus les jeunes qui gagnent parce que ce genre de jeu se prête plus à leur comportement à eux que le nôtre.”

the screen with advice, effectively interrupting their play and stigmatizing them as bad players. Participants' difficulties are exacerbated by the Wii consoles, which are all second-hand and well-worn. Worn-out controllers are not sensitive enough that a light press of the button suffices, so players have to mash the button to ensure that the machine registers it, a gesture that is only accessible to participants with a strong grip and flexible joints. Similarly, participants who cannot get up to play struggle to find enough room to do the swinging gesture and have to manoeuvre to do it either on the side of the chair or in front of them. This is particularly troublesome for players in wheelchairs who have to find a way around the wheels or the footrest. In summary, the different and changing abilities of players become intensively visible through their failures to adapt to the demands of the game.

It is not just in old age that the body constrains and limits access to leisure. Interviewees recount that they have had to abandon or transform leisure activities following injuries, accidents, or periods of fatigue. Sylvie taught herself the piano as an adult but had to stop after shoulder surgery after she tore her tendons in a factory job. Philippe had to abandon his dream of becoming a professional pilot when he discovered that he was short-sighted and daltonian in middle school. Individuals have to contend with the fluctuations of their embodied selves over time. Yet old age represents a distinct challenge in that regard. The symbolical association of aging with decline reframes the body's changes as worrying and ominous signs of an implacable downfall. In old age, a broken arm becomes much more than a broken arm: it beckons balance issues, a weakening body, brittle bones, and limitations in mobility that may not ever be recovered from. Forgetting one's keys, once nothing more than an annoying moment of distraction, constitutes a worrying sign or even a symptom. The pathologization of aging dramatizes bodily changes as harbingers of the dreaded fourth age.

Older adults' relationship with their bodies revolves around a sense of tension and fatalism but also acceptance. Martine, who has had a chronic illness since her 40s, proposes a theory of disabled old age: "But at first, I would insist, as everyone does. And the more I would insist, the more it would hurt." She later adds: "So the day I accepted that I was disabled and that I would present as disabled to people, well I saw 50% of my emotional and moral load disappear." Martine has devised a life philosophy that takes the rapid and unpredictable changes in her body into account: "in the morning, when I wake up, I never know how I'll feel. I never know what I'll be able to do. So there's an attitude to have concerning that": "I'm much more peaceful. And when I cannot do things, I say, I cannot do those things."¹⁴⁴ A similar priority given to comfort and peace comes up in other interviewees and workshop participants' accounts. This phenomenon echoes Loe's (2010, 2015) observation that older adults value comfortable aging over successful or productive aging. In that regard, technology (new and old) supports autonomy and continuity. Video games feature in the "collections of handy gadgets" that older

¹⁴⁴"Mais au début je me braquais, comme tout le monde. Et plus je me braquais, plus ça faisait mal." ; "Donc le jour où j'ai accepté d'être handicapée et de me présenter comme handicapée aux gens, eh bien j'ai vu 50 % de ma charge émotionnelle et morale tomber d'un étage." ; " C'est-à-dire que moi, le matin, quand je me réveille, je ne sais jamais dans quel état je suis. Je ne sais jamais ce que je vais pouvoir faire. Alors il y a une attitude à avoir par rapport à ça" ; "Je suis beaucoup plus sereine. Et quand je peux pas faire les choses, je dis, je peux pas faire les choses."

adults maintain to rearrange everyday life in a way that accommodates changing abilities and fosters a comfortable old age.

Older adults who play video games have to provide an intense effort to engage with video games and playing devices. The latter are not designed with older adults in mind, a situation that creates symbolical and material impediments to older adults' domestication of video games. Even when games feature quick tutorials and instructions, their gameplay often relies on assumed pre-existing knowledge. Khalili-Mahani *et al.*'s (2020) study, in which older adults are invited to take part in workshops during which they talk about and learn to play video games, highlights this pattern: participants do not know that, traditionally, players can make their character jump with the A button, or that the screen scrolls left to right in platform games. Older adults generally have few or no relationships with other video game players and thus find themselves stranded when they come up against challenging or unfamiliar expectations. Furthermore, the lack of accessibility options in video games affects older adults. Overall, although old age cannot be reduced to a uniform biological process of decline, older adults have to engage in some serious adaptation work to reconcile digital play and the aging body.

The Mutual Adjustment Of Older Players And Video Games

Adaptation is a core feature of older adults' experience with video games. Older adults' digital play relies on the encounter of two entities that are slightly too rigid to effortlessly interact with each other. Digital play only becomes possible when older adults manage to bridge the gap between their bodies and the machines. This process of realignment between the user and the script is typical of the appropriation of new technology. In Science & Technology Studies, scholars like Jouët (2000:497, my own translation) analyze “the adjustments that occur between the socio-technical framework that posits an ideal set of uses and the actual practices that partially embrace this ideal but also twist it.”

Older adults set up socio-technical configurations that facilitate engagement with games and playing devices. Older adults who play on their own invest time and energy in arranging the spaces in which they play. Martine, who spends sizable chunks of her day playing role-playing games on her console and hidden-object or puzzle games on her tablet, has dedicated two different spaces to video games. In her attic, Martine has cardboard boxes upon cardboard boxes full of her old consoles (a SuperNES, a Nintendo64, and a GameCube) and cartridges (including *Zelda: Windwaker*, *Zelda: Twilight Princess*, and *Fire Emblem*) as well as an old-school cathodic television set in which she can plug her old consoles. The video game play space itself occupies the back of the living room where an ergonomic chair faces a piece of furniture with a flat TV screen, the Nintendo Switch console plugged into it, and a PS4 and WiiU consoles inside a drawer. Her tablet usually sits on the coffee table between the chair and TV, plugged into the multi-socket nearby. Martine made sure that the space would be comfortable:

I have no choice anyway, I must be comfortably installed, because there are times when I play for four hours straight [...] so since I'm more comfortable in my ergonomic chair than behind my desk typing away at the computer, sitting down all day, that I couldn't. Here instead I'm sitting comfortably. I bought myself this chair with the express purpose, not to play but because I have a somewhat fragile back.¹⁴⁵

The ergonomic chair and the setup allow her to play during illness flare-ups that prevent her from engaging in other activities such as buying groceries or driving her car around. In Yvette's case, the spatial arrangement of her play takes into account technological requirements and symbolic meanings associated with leisure. Yvette plays in one specific spot of her living room: on the couch, near a tea table that is close enough to an electrical outlet that she can play on her tablet while it is plugged in. Most importantly, this configuration allows Yvette to play video games in the same spot where she enjoys all her leisure activities: "It's in front of the TV, too, so when I watch TV it's there. And so, um, that's where I do the sudokus, well. Always the same spot, um. On, on the left part of the couch."¹⁴⁶ The setup of Jacqueline's play reproduces a spatial distinction between work and leisure. Jacqueline plays where she reads, in a dedicated leisure spot reminiscent of Yvette's:

In my armchair, in the living room. [...] But always lying down a little. I always have my legs up when I read. It's the Internet position. I don't like doing that at a table. [...] Yes, play is about relaxing. Being at a table with my computer is work. It's an opposition between the two actually. So much so that when I need to write a business letter, I get up and go sit at the table. I noticed that.¹⁴⁷

Older players engage in *bricolage* to soften the rigidity of video games. The practice of altering and hijacking devices to better suit one's needs is widespread among technology users and video game players. Older technology users in particular routinely customize technology. Caradec (1999) mentions older respondents who put colourful dots on the keys of their landline phone to compensate for their short-sightedness or who walk around with their cordless phone in their pocket when they are at home to ensure that they will hear the phone ring. *Golden-Age Games* workshops are prime sites to observe *bricolage* in older adults' video game play, although it is often initiated by organizers rather than participants:

¹⁴⁵“Je suis obligée de toute façon d’être installée confortablement, parce qu’il y a des moments où tu joues quatre heures d’affilée. [...] du coup comme je suis mieux dans mon fauteuil ergonomique plutôt que derrière mon bureau à taper sur mon ordi, assise toute la journée, ça je pourrais pas. Alors que là je suis bien assise. je me suis achetée ce fauteuil d’ailleurs exprès, pas pour jouer mais parce que j’ai un dos qui est quand même un peu fragile.”

¹⁴⁶“C’est face à la télé, aussi, donc quand je regarde la télé c’est là. Et puis, euh, c’est là que je fais les sudoku, voilà. Toujours la même place, euh. A, à gauche sur le canapé.”

¹⁴⁷“Dans mon fauteuil, dans le salon. [...] Mais toujours un peu allongée. J’ai toujours les jambes en l’air, quand je lis. C’est la position pour faire de l’Internet. J’aime pas faire ça à une table. [...] Oui, le jeu c’est la détente. Être à une table avec mon ordinateur c’est le travail. C’est une opposition en fait. A tel point que quand j’ai à faire un courrier d’affaires, je vais à une table. Je me suis aperçue de ça.”

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The volunteer tells me that there was one thing that really surprised him at the beginning: there are very different types of dependency, and they have to find solutions for each person and their specific disability. He gives me examples: for a hearing-impaired person, the volunteers set up the drawing software *Paint* on a tablet. [...] For visually impaired participants, volunteers offer music or quiz games. [...] Participants have various difficulties and volunteers have to improvise.

In another workshop, volunteers have imagined songs and choreographies to help participants remember what to do in order to throw the ball in *Wii Bowling*. A popular form of *bricolage* in the workshops involves scorekeeping. In *Wii Sports Bowling*, score calculation is hard-coded into the console: players cannot customize the rules. Each player's first few throws are usually spent trying to understand how the game works or remembering how to play. Consequently, their scores are mediocre and discouraging. In response to participants' frustration, volunteers get around the scorekeeping system by allowing players to make between two and ten throws each and then writing down the two best scores of the lot. In these workshops, there is usually one volunteer whose job is to replace the machine and keep track of the scores in a little notebook.

Older adults who play video games conduct a double-sided adaptation work. On one hand, older players tinker with video games to make them more accessible. On the other, they turn video games into strategic instruments to adjust to the changing circumstances of aging and particularly the changes of the aging body. Video games then constitute an alternative to other activities that are no longer easily available. Examples of video games' role as compensation for the aging body's unreliability abound in older players' accounts. Alain mostly plays in the evening: "to be honest with you, my hearing is somewhat weakening. [...] I'm really disabled when it comes to watching TV. And so for a while now, after dinner, there's TV for my wife and my daughter while I go back to my office when I get on with my business, including playing a little game."¹⁴⁸ For Yvette, video games functions as an alternative to books:

So then now it turns out that I don't read at all anymore. [...] Because I was, if you'd seen the number of books I had in my apartment, it's crazy, really. [...] I lose my immediate memory. And so, I read a few pages and when I close the book, the next day I don't know what I've read at all, I have to start it all again from the beginning. [...] So the interesting thing with sudoku and *Scrabble* is that you don't have to remember anything, you see.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸“Moi, pour tout vous dire mon audition est quelque peu affaiblie. [...] Au niveau télévision je suis vraiment handicapé. Et donc ça fait déjà un moment que après le repas, il y a le plan télé, mon épouse et ma fille, et moi je me replie dans mon bureau où je vaque à mes occupations dont notamment jouer un petit peu.”

¹⁴⁹“Bon alors là il se trouve que je ne lis plus du tout. [...] Parce que j'étais, si vous saviez le nombre de livres que j'ai dans mon appartement, c'est dingue, hein. [...] Je perds la mémoire récente. Et alors, je lis quelques pages, et quand je ferme le livre, le lendemain je sais plus du tout ce que j'ai lu, il faut que je reparte à zéro. [...] Alors l'intérêt du sudoku et du *Scrabble* c'est que on n'a pas de choses à retenir, voyez.”

In the aftermath of a heavy surgical operation for a back injury, Christophe had to spend three months lying down: “So it’s true that then games were used quite a lot.¹⁵⁰” Martine relies on video games to occupy her through the rough patches of her illness and even to gauge her health:

When I’m not doing well, I still play. And it’s the quality of my play that will sometimes show me that I am not doing well. [...] Here I know in advance, it warns me that my health is going down, but if I don’t feel it right away, it’s an indication in any case. [...] It gives me information about fibromyalgia crises. It sounds stupid.¹⁵¹

Martine explicitly counts on video games to compensate for the things that her body is increasingly preventing her to do:

You have to accept that you’re slowed down, and depending on that, compensate it with something else. That’s why I play video games, what did you imagine? No, but I’m telling you. What I can’t do anymore, well yes, what I can’t do for real anymore, I have my characters do it. And I have the same pleasure, I find exactly the same pleasure in it. When I walk around the forest in the Hyrule kingdom, I’m telling you, there’s no catch.¹⁵²

The use of video games to cope with aging and the changing body reflects a broader trend in older adults’ relationship with technology. The experience of aging is primarily about change, whether in physical abilities, material means, or symbolic resources. To maintain a sense of continuity and coherence, older adults make strategic choices that account for these changes while providing acceptable alternatives. Rather than intense activity or passive disengagement, older adults enter into a process of *déprise* through which they reallocate diminishing resources away from increasingly inaccessible projects and toward meaningful activities (Barthe *et al.* 1990). Technology plays a leading role in *déprise* strategies, as in the case of the respondent who turned to the Minitel when his poor eyesight started to prevent him from reading the phone book (Caradec 1999). Interviewees’ accounts provide numerous illustrations of this phenomenon. Yvette copes with the memory issues that have forced her to stop reading novels by taking up literature-adjacent activities to maintain her image of herself as an avid reader: “Even now, when I listen to the radio, I look for programs about authors, writers, all that. It’s, I’m a literature person.¹⁵³” Nathalie’s husband recently had a stroke that limited his ability to engage in most of his former hobbies: now, as a couple, “[w]e buy things on Amazon, because

¹⁵⁰ “Donc c’est vrai que là les jeux ils ont pas mal servis.”

¹⁵¹ “Quand je suis pas on, je joue quand même. Et c’est la qualité de mon jeu qui va me montrer quelque fois que je suis pas on. [...] Là je sais d’avance, ça me prévient que ma santé est en train de descendre, mais si je le sens pas sur le moment. c’est une indication en même temps. [...] Ça me donne une indication sur ma crise de fibromyalgie. Ça a l’air con.”

¹⁵² “Il faut accepter d’être ralenti, et en fonction de ça, pallier par autre chose. C’est pour ça que je joue aux jeux vidéo, qu’est-ce que tu crois. Non mais je t’assure. Ce que je ne peux plus faire, bah oui, ce que je ne peux plus faire en vrai, je le fais faire par mes personnages. Et j’ai le même plaisir. je retrouve exactement le même plaisir. Quand je me balade en forêt dans le royaume d’Hyrule, je t’assure qu’il n’y a pas de souci.”

¹⁵³ “Même à l’heure actuelle, quand j’écoute la radio, je cherche des émissions sur des auteurs, des écrivains, tout ça. C’est, je suis littéraire.”

my husband, he loves that, since he can't anymore, since he doesn't do anything anymore, he's at home.¹⁵⁴”

An Unexpected Kinship: Aging Consoles And Older Players

Older adults who play video games develop complex and intimate connections with their games and gaming devices. This reflects the role of technology in reconfiguring the experience of the body in old age. Many older adults conduct their everyday life with and through assistive devices and implanted technology such as walking aids, hip implants, or long-term pharmaceutical treatment. Technology thus becomes an intimate and sometimes invasive companion that older adults have to domesticate. Joyce and Mamo (2006) draw on Haraway's concept of the cyborg to shed light on this experience. The figure of the cyborg speaks to the blurred frontiers of our human bodies and the intimate embodied relationships we construct with technology; it is a fundamentally political metaphor that calls attention to the ambivalence of technology in a neoliberal context (Haraway 1991). As Joyce and Mamo note, it is older adults (rather than the muscular young men that are ubiquitous in science fiction-inspired representations of the future) that are the most likely to live the ambiguous experience of the cyborg. Joyce and Mamo describe the “grey cyborg” primarily as an older person living with medical surgeries, medication, and devices, but the argument can be extended (and in fact has been extended) to other groups such as people who live with disabilities (Reeve 2012). Dalibert (2015) suggests that aging has a distinctly strong relationship with the cyborg insofar as it facilitates the embodiment of technology, particularly in medical contexts. Dalibert's study on the acceptability of pain management technology (an implant that stimulates the spinal cord) to middle-aged and older patients highlights that aging individuals tend to have a more peaceful and less traumatic relationship with the implant. Dalibert connects this phenomenon to the perception of one's aging body as a body-in-pieces in which the dysfunction or change of one of the pieces does not alter the sense of a coherent self. The figure of the grey cyborg brings to light the emotional, visceral, and fraught relationship of older adults with technology.

A striking aspect of older adults' play is the encounter of aging bodies with aging technology. Interviewees' long histories with games highlight the ambivalent status of video games as new technology. Although they belong to the cultural category of new and digital technology, video games have been commercially available for forty years (Blanchet and Montagnon 2020). The video game industry functions with an accelerated production cycle in which newer technology replaces (rather than coexists with) previous iterations (Newman 2012). Although player communities have set up initiatives to preserve “golden oldies”, the uncertain cultural status of video games complicates their storage and archiving over time, as Blanchet and Montagnon's difficulties in collecting historical data about video games in France illustrates. Video games thus age with difficulty.

¹⁵⁴“On fait des achats sur Amazon, parce que mon mari il adore ça, comme il peut plus, comme il fait plus rien, qu'il est à la maison.”

The phenomenon is particularly visible in the case of the *Golden-Age Games* project which is structured around a video game console that came out in 2006 and was discontinued in 2013. Organizers struggle to find the console: they scour charity shops and volunteers' attics to find enough machines for the workshops. The console's publisher, Nintendo, has recently asked the *Golden-Age Games* association to stop using the consoles in competitions. The company gains nothing from the current setup because they do not sell the Wii any longer. According to an administrator, Nintendo hopes that *Golden-Age Games* will move on their more recent Switch instead, although the idea has already been nixed by the board of directors because of the console's lack of accessibility for beginners and people with disabilities. The workshops still run with the Wii, introducing older adults to an obsolete version of new technology:

[field notes from a video game convention] On the *Golden-Age Games* stand, the administrators have organized a Wii Bowling match: they recruit passersby (usually children or teenagers) to play and equip them with age-simulation suits. A boy (about 12 years old) exclaims "Wow, who still plays on the Wii? We're in 2019!" The association coordinator hears him, repeats what he said, and laughs (somewhat bitterly).

As for the tablets, in many workshops, they are either second-hand or reconditioned. To a lesser extent, interviewees also maintain relationships with dated devices and games. Alain mentions emulators: "There are websites that have specialized in resurrecting these old games. And it's extremely nice, because when you've played them, well."¹⁵⁵ Older adults' inclination for aging video game technology is a pattern that several material factors reinforce. Their restricted access to video game communities limits their exposure to new releases. The lack of sociability around their play makes it disproportionately difficult to move from one platform to another. Moreover, they often inherit relatives' old playing devices and digital technology. As a result, older players are likely to stay with one game for a long time rather than cycle through the newest releases.

Older players relate to their aging video game technology in a way that reflects their relationship with old age. A frequent theme in both *Golden-Age Games* workshops and interviews is the machines' unreliability, which is often framed as a natural consequence of their age. The old age of the machine is the go-to explanation when organizers and players face an unexpected reaction, such as a brutal shutdown or a flickering screen. Older players also address their playing devices as fragile actors who must be treated with care and patience. Martine encourages her console ("Whenever you're ready, sweetie."¹⁵⁶) and takes care of all her devices before she settles down to play ("here, my phone, I'll plug it in too because it's starting to. Good, this way everyone's plugged in, we're good."¹⁵⁷). Their interactions with the device on which they play are not always affectionate. In workshops, participants can enter into an adversarial and even hostile relationship with the consoles. Through repeated failures and low scores, the

¹⁵⁵"Il y a des sites qui se sont spécialisés dans la résurrection de ces vieux jeux. Et c'est extrêmement agréable, parce que quand on a joué, voilà."

¹⁵⁶"Quand tu veux, pépette."

¹⁵⁷"Tiens, mon téléphone je vais le brancher aussi parce qu'il commence à. Voilà, comme ça tout le monde est branché, c'est bon."

figure of an agentive, mean-spirited machine emerges. The console's lack of cooperation is presented as a result of its age, which has made it lazy, stupid, or moody. But as a general rule older players exhibit compassion and kindness toward the machines. They encourage them and care for these unpredictable, tired, and expensive devices. Older players value loyalty toward technology. Interviewees continue to use or simply store old devices in recognition of the fact that these machines have served them well. Martine has cardboard boxes full of machines and cartridges that she does not use for fear of breaking them for good. In summary, the affinity between older players and their aging technology suggests that technology supports the experience of old age in unexpected ways.

4.4. No (Gaming) Money, No (Gamer) Friends: Constrained Play In Old Age

The social, material, and economic circumstances of old age shape older adults' video game play, and they do so largely through the challenges and constraints that they pose. Although experiences of old age are diverse, particularly along gender and class lines, this stage of the life course is associated with a distinctive economic and social position. In the economic context of old age, older players manage their limited playing resources. Their entry into the practice is supported by decisive sociabilities, particularly among relatives and colleagues. Aside from these early days, older adults' video game play tends to be solitary, in keeping with the reconfiguration of social networks in old age.

Tightened Purse Strings: Limited Leisure Budgets In Old Age

Material factors such as limited financial resources or spatial constraints affect digital play just like other social and cultural factors such as unfavourable representations of old age or opposition from other household members. In that sense, the economic conditions of old age shape older adults' video game play. Pragmatically, older players' ability to engage with video games depends on their physical access to the desired games or playing devices: either they can buy or borrow them, or they have to abstain.

The material conditions of life in old age are varied, reflecting the intersection of age and class. In France, individuals over sixty nonetheless share a structuring economic predicament: they receive pensions from a state-administered retirement system. Older adults' mandatory exit from the labour market significantly affects their access to economic resources. Individuals have very different experiences of old age depending on whether they rely on retirement, pensions, or old-age benefits, a situation that depends on former career and income levels which are themselves tied to one's social background, family circumstances, health, geographical location, and level of qualification (Meron and Silvera 2004; Fontaine and Pennec 2020). There are however some commonalities in older adults' experiences: a dependency on the State (as it supervises the pension system for both private- and public-sector employees, and private pensions funds are comparatively rare), vulnerability to policy changes, a fixed income, and very limited possibilities to re-engage in paid work.

Debates about a generational conflict have entrenched the notion of older adults as a caste that hoards economic resources (especially in terms of real estate) and imposes disadvantageous political leadership onto young adults. Through studies conducted since the 1990s, Chauvel (2013) demonstrates that the generations born in the 1930s and 1940s have benefited from the post-Second World War economic boom and establishment of a welfare state insofar as their income has progressed much faster and remains significantly higher today than those of later generations (from the cohorts born in the 1960s to today). The notion that older adults unfairly

and selfishly profit from their position has seeped into “OK boomer” memes¹⁵⁸. The sixty and seventy-year-old of today’s pivotal role in family solidarity highlight that they concentrate important amounts of economic resources (Bonvalet, Clement, and Ogg 2013).

Yet the significant economic heterogeneity within the category of older adults nuances the idea of a rich and powerful retiree class. As a whole, individuals over 65 have the same average standard of living as the rest of the population (about €21,000 per person in 2006) and a lower poverty rate (14% of the population and 10% of individuals over 65 live with 60% or less of the median income) (Augris and Bac 2008). But the economic situation quickly deteriorates for higher age brackets. Moreover, the proportion of older adults who live under the poverty line has been increasing since the 1990s. The proportion of low-income individuals increases with age: according to 2008 INSEE data, 5% of 45-54-years-old and 24% of 85+-years-old live with under 1000€ a month (Renaut 2011). In contrast, the proportion of high-income individuals strongly decreases, with 53% of 45-54-years-old and 16% of 85+-years-old earning more than 2500€ a month. Class continues to matter in old age, and factors such as income, health, and inherited wealth are strongly correlated to an individual’s chance of aging. For instance, there is a thirteen-year difference between the life expectancy of men who are in the top 5% and men who are in the bottom 5% in terms of income level (Blanpain 2018). Gender affects both the experience of old age in general (particularly in terms of life expectancy and health) and the specific issue of economic standing (in 2017, the retirement pension’s average monthly amount was €1777 for men and €1096 for women). Overall, while older adults as a whole have an economic situation that is comparable with the general population, pre-existing economic inequalities tend to intensify with age. Women and working-class individuals (among other groups) see their financial position deteriorate when they reach retirement and worsen over time.

The economic context of old age affects older adults’ careers as video game players. Economic resources are a recurring topic of conversation and a decisive factor in older adults’ practice. First and foremost, they dictate older players’ ability to procure playing devices and games. Nicole stopped playing when she retired because her home computer was unable to run the point’n’click games she used to play on the powerful computers of her workplace, an administrative centre that stored and calculated tax-related data. As upgrading the home computer was not an option in Nicole’s working-class household, she moved her digital play to her smartphone when she bought one, several years later. Martine’s play biography is shaped by her fluctuating economic situation. Her irregular work trajectory, a disability that flared up in her 40s, and life events that had her raise her children entirely on her own complicated her finances to the point that she underwent over-indebtedness proceedings a few years ago. She now describes herself as living comfortably but did go through rough patches. During one such period, Martine had to sell consoles and games to cover the costs of moving. She managed to buy them back but could not afford a newer console; “And when the Switch came up two years

¹⁵⁸The reference to selfish boomers is all the more interesting that it is generally used to describe a specific subgroup of older adults, 50- and 60-years-olds born in the 60s and 70s, who barely knew the “*Trente Glorieuses*” (the thirty years of economic prosperity after the end of the Second World War) and came of age in the aftermath of the 1973 oil shock and 1980s economic recession.

ago, I licked my TV screen when the ads came on [laughing] because I had checked my budget and [laughing] I still thought I couldn't afford it with the retirement pension.¹⁵⁹ Sylvie has a similar economic profile: early divorce and single motherhood, low-pay landscaping and factory jobs, and a work-related disability. Sylvie lives off her unemployment benefits while she awaits retirement and is very careful about the money she spends. To be able to play *World of Warcraft* (on which she spends over six hours a day) on a limited budget, Sylvie decided to build the computer herself: "I had saved for three and a half years in order to, to do it. [...] So you don't do it on a whim, really. It's not cheap. It cost me €1300 still, total, without the screen.¹⁶⁰" The lack of money has similarly weighed on her children's play ("So, um, I bought them PlayStation, Xbox, all that, mostly second-hand for starters, I didn't have much money.¹⁶¹") and her other leisure practices ("I don't have a tablet, I'd like to have one for my watercolour painting, that would be super useful, but I can't afford it.¹⁶²").

Leisure-related expenses constitute an adjustment variable when times become difficult. The phenomenon is not limited to video games or old age. Older adults have had to abandon all sorts of activities for financial reasons over time. Nathalie, a live-in carer for disabled older adults, had to cancel her subscription to a service that let her watch TV on her smartphone when she spent the week at her employer's. Michel had to sell his extensive paperback collection to afford a tape player for his sick daughter. Martine stopped collecting posters and reading magazines about motorbikes when she realized that she could never afford to buy one. Because of the precarious status of leisure in household budgets, video game play is regularly under threat. In old age, individuals have to reconcile a fixed income with increases in the cost of living. Despite the representation (and marketing) of retirement as a golden age for leisure, many older adults adjust their expenses in ways that de-prioritize leisure.

Older adults who play video games nonetheless find ways around economic constraints. Promotional sales and second-hand circuits are useful alternatives. Non-commercial exchanges (particularly within the family and friends circle) play a decisive role in older players' equipment. Martine explains how she got the console of her dreams, the Nintendo Switch:

I had talked about it, of course, to people around me, I talked about it to my son, and he managed. He raised money among relatives. And for my birthday two years ago, he gave me the Switch with the *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* that comes with it.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹"Et quand la Switch est arrivée il y a deux ans, je léchais ma télé quand il y avait les pubs [rires], parce que j'avais fait mes comptes et [rires] je trouvais quand même que je pouvais pas me l'offrir, avec la retraite."

¹⁶⁰"Moi j'ai économisé pendant trois ans et demi pour me, pour me le faire. [...] Donc on fait pas ça à l'aveuglette, quoi. C'est pas donné. J'en ai eu pour 1300€ quand même, au total, sans compter l'écran."

¹⁶¹"Donc, euh, je leur ai acheté PlayStation, Xbox, tout ça, plutôt d'occasion au début, j'avais pas beaucoup d'argent."

¹⁶²"J'ai pas de tablette, j'aimerais bien justement pour l'aquarelle, ça serait super utile, mais j'ai pas les moyens."

¹⁶³"J'en ai parlé bien sûr autour de moi, j'en parle à mon fils, et il s'est démerdé. Il a fait la collecte familiale. Et puis pour mon anniversaire d'il y a deux ans, il m'a offert la Switch avec le *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* qui va avec"

This emphasis on second-hand and gifted items is common among video game players who have limited financial resources, including young players, as Alain's memory of his studies in computer science attests:

Because of course all the games cost something. So, except for wealthy people who could buy all the games they wanted, um, we bought one and for other games, we found roundabout ways when we couldn't buy them. So, they circulated like that a little bit", "a little sneakily, let's say.¹⁶⁴

Leisure is similarly constrained in aged care institutions because of the financial management of *EHPAD* and *résidences-autonomie*. This is particularly visible in the host institutions of *Golden-Age Games* workshops, which are in their majority state-funded institutions in less affluent areas. Almost all institutions have a leisure supervisor whose mission is to set up activities and events to entertain residents, but they often operate on very small budgets:

[field notes from a conversation with a local coordinator] The coordinator explains that most *EHPADs* have no money. Leisure supervisors make DIY workshops in which participants fashion objects out of empty toilet paper rolls. The coordinator remembers that once she had to buy snacks with her own money because the *EHPAD* could not (or would not) provide them for a competition.

In one workshop, the leisure coordinator proudly shows me her makeshift sensory toys: two bottles glued together and filled with dishwashing liquid, food dye and sequins are an alternative to the expensive therapeutic objects that the *EHPAD* cannot afford. The *Golden-Age Games* project and particularly local branches of the civic service provider have similarly tight budgets. Coupled with organizers' lack of familiarity with digital play, this makes participants' access to video games particularly precarious:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The coordinator tells me that she naively thought that *Golden-Age Games* would provide the Wii consoles. In fact, she had to manage on her own. She bought two consoles from volunteers and looked on a classified ads website. She found the game in a second-hand game shop. She describes the whole thing as "very rudimentary". Then the coordinator's managers told her that they had to use *Wii Sports*' automatic mode. With the automatic mode, players don't need to time the release of the button to let the ball go: they just have to swing in the right direction. (The introduction of this mode in a later version of the game suggests that many players struggled with the release of the button.) But when asked to set up the automatic mode, the coordinator did not know what that was, and neither did volunteers. They asked around and looked it up, finally figuring out that they didn't have the right version of the game for that. I tell her that indeed, you need *Wii Sports Resort* for the automatic

¹⁶⁴“Parce qu'évidemment tous les jeux étaient payants. Donc à par pour les gens aisés qui pouvaient s'offrir tous les jeux qu'ils voulaient, bah, on en achetait un et puis les autres on se débrouillait quand on pouvait pas les acheter. Donc ça circulait un peu comme ça”, “un peu sous le manteau, on va dire.”

mode; I have met several coordinators with the same issue, so now I know. The coordinator tells me that they ended up playing in manual mode anyway, even though this disadvantages participants because *Golden-Age Games* regional competitions use the automatic mode.

Organizers have to improvise in order to set up workshops in the generally ill-adapted environments of aged care institutions. Limited budgets and outmoded accommodations bring their share of material constraints. While there usually is a TV room that is suitable for the workshops, volunteers occasionally have to move heavy furniture around, take down the paintings to use the wall as a blank screen for the projector, or precariously pile up chairs onto tables to set up the projector at a sufficient height. A recurring issue stems from the lack of Internet connection. Most of the *EHPAD* and *résidences-autonomie* that host *Golden-Age Games* workshops have no Wi-Fi even though the workshops partly depend on it (in order to download tablet games or demonstrate how to use tablets, for instance). Residents who really want to use the Internet are encouraged by management to install and pay for their own Internet connection in their room. Volunteers sometimes use their own smartphones as Wi-Fi hotspots, but this makeshift solution does not work in remote areas and old buildings where there is no cell phone reception. The lack of Wi-Fi comes up several times, not only as a problem for the conduct of the workshops but also as a disappointment for residents. In some cases, residents successfully pressure managers to set up an Internet connection, a console, or a computer in the nursing home:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Two volunteers and two participants are doing something (*Google Street View* demonstrations, apparently) on the *EHPAD*'s computer. I ask the leisure supervisor when the computer was set up in the common room, because it's the first time I see something like this in an *EHPAD*. She tells me that one of the residents needed a computer to upload and send his pictures, so the leisure supervisors let him use theirs, but he needed it a lot... and looked through other residents' files, too. So the leisure supervisors asked the director if they could buy an extra computer for residents, and he said yes.

Material conditions shape older adults' entry into video game play. In order to explore the issue of access to technology in old age, I take Lafontaine and Sawchuk's (2015) presentation of the InterACTion project as a point of departure and comparison with *Golden-Age Games*. InterACTion is a digital literacy initiative that the ACT research team conducts in collaboration with a community organization in downtown Montreal. It aims to facilitate older social housing residents' access to Information and Communication Technology. InterACTion adopts a comprehensive approach that takes into account all seven aspects of Clement and Shade's Access Rainbow Model. Lafontaine and Sawchuk draw several lessons from the InterACTion project, all of which resonate with the situation of older video game players, particularly in the *Golden-Age Games* workshops. Firstly, a lack of knowledge about ICT is both a motivator and barrier to participate in digital literacy projects. In order to learn about new devices and uses, one has to know about those devices and uses. InterACTion participants struggle to make

specific requests regarding digital literacy workshops because they lack basic knowledge about what is possible, just like *Golden-Age Games* participants cannot answer volunteers' questions about what games they would like to discover.

Secondly, material, embodied, and financial factors are critical in older adults' access to technology – and they are often intertwined in complex ways. For instance, gender and social class shape individuals' technobiographies and skillsets, which in turn has consequences on which device they feel most comfortable with; but gender and social class also have repercussions on their economic position, their spending abilities, and in the end their choice of device. Lafontaine and Sawchuk note the tension between InterACTion participants' overall preference for computers (which feel more familiar and accessible) and purchase of tablets (because they are significantly less expensive than computers, both upfront and in terms of data plan).

Thirdly, older adults' access to new technology is a matter of sociality and space. InterACTion participants technically have access to the Internet and computers in public and free spaces such as libraries, but they refrain from asking for help there because it would activate the vulnerable and undesirable identity of “confused old person”. InterACTion workshops' success relies on “warm experts” reminiscent of the relatives and friends that facilitate older adults' entry into video game play. However, InterACTion participants' limited access to the workshops' space undermines their domestication of technology. In that regard, the similarities between InterACTion and *Golden-Age Games* are striking: in a space controlled by institutions and social workers with significant power over older adults' everyday life, devices are locked away, their use is supervised, and conflict is a common occurrence among people who did not choose to live together.

Finally, the authors highlight the importance of meanings and *bricolage* in the domestication of technology in old age, noting participants' creative solutions. These solutions include habits that *Golden-Age Games* participants also exhibit, such as writing a list of questions and requests over the course of the week and bringing it to volunteers on the day of the workshop. Lafontaine and Sawchuk concludes with a revision of Clement & Shade's model that finds an illustration in older video game players' experience as well: “Barriers to access are plural, certainly, but they merge, overlap and crisscross persistently: they are closer, perhaps, to a ball of string or a bowl of rainbow-colored spaghetti than a neat rainbow” (p. 239).

Friendly Colleagues And Adult Children: The Sociabilities Of Early Video Game Play

Older adults' video game play is embedded into their social environment, particularly at its outset. As a rule, older adults do not engage with digital play on their own: relatives, friends, or colleagues play an instrumental role in setting the practice in motion (De Schutter *et al.* 2014). Interviewees' video game careers and technological biographies illustrate that equipment and

early practice are grounded in existing relationships. For instance, Isabelle started playing games with her ex-partner, first on a handheld console and later on the computer, both devices having been bought on the initiative of her ex-partner. He took the console with him when he left for military service and thus interrupted this particular play practice for Isabelle. When she started playing again about five years ago, it was on the tablet that her daughter gave her and with games that her daughter had downloaded for her.

Older adults start playing on the suggestion and with the help of their relatives, friends, or colleagues. These individuals have a decisive role in older adults' access to video games. The family circle is the most frequent entry point into video game play. Adult children are technology brokers who equip, encourage, and justify their parents' play. It is a common pattern in older adults' relationship with ICT and specifically with video games (Pearce 2009; De Schutter *et al.* 2014). More than half the interviewees started playing video games at their children's suggestion. It is Yvette's daughter who gave her a tablet and installed a sudoku game on it. Sylvie started playing *World of Warcraft* with her son. When they come to visit, Dominique and Bernard's son and Michel's daughter bring consoles and games with them to play with their parents. Caradec (1999:84, my own translation) uses the bridge metaphor to characterize relatives and friends' importance in older adults' technological equipment, highlighting the "role of a Trojan Horse of technological modernity that children play through the gifts that they make". A common pattern in older adults' relationship with new technology is the presence of an intergenerational system of equipment that relies on gifts and hand-me-downs from younger to older individuals. Interviewees have often received their first games as a present from younger relatives. Martine explains: "That's the second tablet I've ever had. The thing is that my daughter had bought, she always buys the latest gadgets, and when she stops using them she gives them to me."¹⁶⁵ In contrast, children's play in childhood or adolescence rarely encourages parents to play.

The workplace also offers opportunities for older adults to start playing video games. Some lines of work facilitate individuals' mastery of ICT, particularly computers and/or the Web. For instance, among middle-class 'baby boomers', women who had secretarial or teaching careers draw on their work experience to domesticate personal computers:

if administrative employees are relegated to "dominated" uses of the computer, they still had an opportunity to domesticate very early an "ordinary" practice of the computer that they will continue later on with computers and the Internet in the domestic sphere. This will grant them an undeniable advantage in the rest of their career and most of all when they retire. (Delias 2019:9, my own translation).

¹⁶⁵“Ça c'est ma deuxième tablette. c'est-à-dire que ma fille a acheté, achète toujours les derniers trucs et quand elle les utilise plus, elle me les refile.”

Buse (2010) finds similar patterns in her study on computer use in later life and notes for instance that the older women who had occupied secretarial positions and used computers (or even typewriters) at work were more comfortable with the Internet and various digital practices.

Besides its role in familiarizing individuals with the basics of digital technology, work is also a space of socialization to video games. Indeed, it is at work and through their colleagues that most interviewees played video games for the first time. Breaks during work shifts play a particularly important role in this process. Jacqueline started playing games during her night shifts as a hospital administrator: “There were games and the hospital’s IT manager had installed [them].¹⁶⁶” Nicole started playing point-and-click games with her colleagues during her breaks when she worked as an administrative agent in a tax office. Christine, who teaches economics in high school, started playing *Solitaire* on her laptop to take a break from preparing her lessons. Video games can become so closely associated to work breaks that the end of the working life leads to a temporary play hiatus. Nicole stopped playing her point-and-click and puzzles once she retired. Her home computer was less efficient than her work computer and kept freezing, she had no colleagues to play with or who could recommend new games, and, as her schedule became less structured, she had no designated time set aside for play. In her case, play quite literally depended on work, and the end of her career restrained her access to play until she picked it up again recently. Higher education had a similar role for some older adults. In the 1970s and 1980s, universities and technical schools provided an access to computers as well as a circle of colleagues or fellow students who could provide games and technical support, as Alain recalls.

The circle of friends and acquaintances also supplies opportunities for older adults to start playing video games, as was the case for Chantal who followed her friends on *Ruzzle* and stayed there after they left. Jacqueline discovered video games with a neighbour who showed her *Tetris*. As for the role of marriage and the couple, it is ambivalent. Although the figure of the geek or even gamer spouse comes up in several interviews, couples seldom play video games together. If anything, video games constitute an object of tension or even conflict, as is the case with Jacqueline and her husband.

From Isolated To Solo Play

The individuals who guide older players into the practice tend to withdraw relatively quickly. Once they have bought the necessary device, installed the game, made a demonstration, and perhaps played along for a little while, these knowledge brokers disappear from older players’ stories. They do not merely fade into the background: they become inaccessible to older players who cannot call on them when they face difficulties in their practice.

¹⁶⁶“Il y avait des jeux et la responsable de l’informatique de l’hôpital [les] avait installés.”

The absence of a supportive and knowledgeable social circle affects older adults' relationship with technology as a whole and video games in particular. Martine has been looking for, and failing to find, a community of fellow gamers who could support her play, initially because she was stuck in a *Zelda* game and her online research did not yield anything helpful. Yvette saw that a friend has a crossword puzzle game on her tablet and wanted to download it on her own device but could not find anyone who was both available and knowledgeable enough to help her. Her friend's son (himself in his sixties) did try, to no avail: "He told me no, I don't know how to. And since I don't master the tablet at all, it stayed like that. So."¹⁶⁷ The popularity of the *Golden-Age Games* workshops as a technological hotline illustrates the widespread need for advice and support among older technology users. Participants' queries go beyond video games: many jump on the opportunity that workshops offer for technical support, sometimes to the point that workshops become partly or entirely dedicated to an activity that has not been anticipated by its organizers.

Broadly speaking, older adults play on their own (Kaufman *et al.* 2016). This reflects the contraction of individuals' social networks and sociability as well as the overall decrease in social interaction in old age. The definitive exit from the labour market severs individuals from a significant space of sociality in adulthood. Events such as children growing up and leaving home, the development of health issues, or the entry into residential aged care institutions further isolate individuals from the social circles to which they used to belong. In old age, sociability centres around specific relatives (in particular adult children and a few horizontal family connections such as siblings, siblings-in-law, and cousins), old friends, and neighbours (Desquesnes, Montfreux, and Rouault 2018). Residents in aged care institutions have a smaller social network than older adults who live at home, although they build relationships within the institution (for about 40% of residents) and maintain connections with relatives and close friends (about 60% talk with at least one of their children at least once a week) (Aliaga and Neiss 1999, cited in Desquesnes *et al.* 2018). The devalued social status of old age contributes to this shift insofar as older adults are made to feel increasingly unwelcome or incongruous in everyday social contexts (Hummel, Mallon, and Caradec 2017). The phenomenon is particularly intense in social spaces centred on video games because of the association between the figure of the gamer and youth. Older players find it difficult to prolong or replace the initial sociability that was so critical to their video game practice. The one exception to this pattern is Sylvie who, as the leader of a guild in *World of Warcraft*, has an active in-game social life.

For the most part, older players are content with the isolation of their play. Except for Martine and Sylvie who identify as gamers, interviewees express indifference or even satisfaction regarding the lack of sociality in relation to their play. They describe playing alone not as a problem but as a preference. Jacqueline, who plays *Scrabble* and mah-jong online, is unequivocal:

¹⁶⁷"Il m'a dit, non, je sais pas. Et comme moi la tablette je la maîtrise pas du tout, c'est resté comme ça. Voilà."

I don't speak to people. Internet, I'm not looking to make player friends. I'm not looking for Internet friends at all, it doesn't interest me. I don't answer at all to anything like "Send to a friend", "Say hi to a friend", "Share", or "Buy". Nothing.¹⁶⁸

She elaborates: "But no, I don't talk about games at all because I consider, here too, to me that's an intimate and personal experience."¹⁶⁹ This predilection for solitary play may result from older adults' efforts to shield their play from the disapproval that surrounds it. But beyond older players' adaptation to their circumstances, their predilection for this type of play suggests that they enjoy taking time for themselves, away from the expectations and obligations of everyday life (*cf.* Chapter 6).

¹⁶⁸"Je ne parle pas aux gens. Internet, je ne cherche pas à avoir des joueurs amis. Je ne cherche pas d'amis par Internet du tout du tout, ça ne m'intéresse pas. Je ne réponds pas du tout à tout ce qui est Envoyez à un ami, Faites signes à un ami, Partagez, Achetez. Rien."

¹⁶⁹"Mais non, je ne parle pas du jeu parce que j'estime, là aussi, pour moi c'est une expérience intime et personnelle."

Conclusion

In video game play, older adults (and other actors involved in their play) actualize, reinforce, but also contest dominant images of old age, especially biomedical understandings of aging and representations of older adults as clueless technology users. Despite its association with cutting-edge technological innovation, digital play facilitates an experience of continuity and constancy in old age. Video game play is more about stability than revolution; it perpetuates earlier leisure and technology practices, fits into a lengthy video game career, and enables individuals to maintain activities through which they assert their personality and identity. Older adults also adjust their play to the embodied experience of change, constrained economic conditions, and narrowing sociabilities associated with old age.

Older adults work toward reinvesting their experience of old age with desirable meanings and images. Video games are a complex object, but it is precisely because they carry multiple and conflicting representations that they constitute precious identity resources for older adults. They get to make sense of their video game play in various ways: a performance of technological skill, an extension or reactivation of a long-time hobby, an adjustment to changes in material or physical circumstances, *etc.* Through video games, an object that is rarely associated with old age, older adults get to reaffirm their identity independently of their age. Their play is still grounded in the social and cultural experience of old age, but it is not tethered to dominant discourses about successful aging or aging as decline. In older adults' practices and stories about their video game play, a perspective on aging that prioritizes comfort (rather than discipline), continuity (rather than reinvention), and creativity (rather than determinism) emerges.

While older players have diverse profiles and practices, their video game careers feature patterns that bring to light how old age shapes digital play. Their video game careers often include early and positive encounters with video games that normalize digital play, a long video game career interspersed with breaks, and the support of relatives, friends, or colleagues in their first forays into digital play. In addition, the social and cultural position of older adults encourages specific practices, preferences, and play forms that give rise to a distinctive video game play style.

CHAPTER 5. GAMERS ON THE EDGE

The Distinctive Practice Of Older Video Game Players

“The only thing I can really do on it, it’s sudoku, that’s it.”¹⁷⁰”

Yvette

It all started when Martine stumbled upon a particularly difficult boss in *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Despite her many tries, Martine simply could not beat them and was stuck, a particularly disheartening situation since she had managed to finish every *Zelda* game she played since *Link to the Past* in 1992. Martine started looking for help: tips, demos, even someone who would be willing to come over and beat the boss for her. She posted on gaming forums, only to be met with taunts and a lingo that she could not understand; she googled “gamers in [her city]” and found a gaming bar, but none of the games featured there were the ones she played; she looked high and low for fellow senior gamers, to no avail. Martine got in touch with many, many people, and got very few responses, let alone the help she needed. She finally managed to beat the *Zelda* boss but had to do it on her own.

Martine’s difficulties illustrate older adults’ limited access to gaming resources, spaces, and sociabilities, and the resulting insecurity of their play. In this chapter, I examine how older adults play video games and I situate their practices in relation to the general population of video game players. Older adults’ play does not resemble the model proposed by the silver gamer discourse, but it does feature specific trends and patterns. Their practices appear to be quite uniform and stable over time: they overwhelmingly play puzzle games and digital versions of non-digital games, with very few digressions into other territories, and many play only one game at a time for long periods. This reflects older adults’ difficult access to video game-related resources, which itself stems from their relative isolation as players. Older players generally have few contacts with other video game players, struggle to enter gaming communities and online spaces, and keep their play under wraps out of discomfort and caution. They exist at the periphery of gaming spaces, particularly when (as is often the case among older players) they are women and engage in “casual” forms of play. This does not preclude older adults from engaging in inventive and diverse play practices, making for a constrained yet creative experience of play in old age.

I argue that older adults’ social and cultural position fosters a distinctive experience of video game play that is situated at the margins of gaming cultures. There is a specificity to older adults’ play, but it is not the result of age-related biological determinants or geriatric medical issues.

¹⁷⁰“La seule chose que je peux vraiment faire dessus, c’est le sudoku, c’est tout.”

The circumstances of old age cultivate a form of play that is “casual”, stable over time, and solitary.

The chapter proposes an overview of older adults’ video game play. Based on statistical and ethnographic data, it considers the relative uniformity of older players’ practices (5.1.) and their players’ marginal position in gaming cultures (5.2.), concluding with a summary of the patterns that characterize older adults’ digital play (5.3.).

5.1. Older Adults' Video Game Play Practices

Older adults play in a way that resembles the dominant play style in the general population of video game players: puzzles and digital card games, computers and smartphones, and regular but short sessions. Statistics highlight the uniformity of older adults' play, which is more noticeable than in other age groups. Yet ethnographic data indicates that, although older adults engage with a limited number of genres and devices, they do so in diverse and creative ways.

The Silver Gamer Model: A Medicalized Play Style

The silver gamer discourse pairs older players with a specific play style that embodies a particular perspective on old age. It is preoccupied with older adults' play, not as it is, but as it should be (Iversen 2016). The silver gamer model articulates video game practices with matters of health maintenance, proposing a medicalized play style. This perspective promotes certain game genres, play practices, and playing devices because of their imagined compatibility with older adults' poor health. It establishes a blueprint of older adults' play along two guidelines: what older adults need to be able to play (for instance uncomplicated game mechanisms, positive reinforcement, uncluttered visuals) and what would benefit older adults (for example cognitively stimulating puzzles, memory exercises, multiplayer games that are accessible to (grand)children as well as older adults).

Older adults' play practice is understood as a form of (cognitive and/or physical) exercise. Older adults are expected to engage in short but regular play sessions, in the same way that they would attend a gym or a walking group. In aged care institutions, social workers apply this logic to *Golden-Age Games* workshops and leisure in general. As a result, they are surprised by participants' discontinuous attendance. Their casual participation does not reflect leisure supervisors' understanding of the workshops as a health maintenance and digital literacy regimen that have to be strictly followed to yield results. Furthermore, the interest in video games' purported health benefits puts an emphasis on certain genres such as exergames and cognitive training games. Several initiatives and studies dedicated to older adults and video games feature the motion-activated Nintendo Wii console (including *Golden-Age Games*). A large subset of the literature on older adults and video games discusses exergames in general and the Wii in particular. It focuses on physical, psychological, and cognitive health through digital play (e.g., Williams *et al.* 2011; Bainbridge *et al.* 2011; Gerling and Masuch 2011).

The silver gamer model only considers games that are deemed accessible to older adults. As the design literature on older adults and video games illustrates, actors invested in the silver gamer discourse tend to paint older adults as a homogeneous group of people suffering (or about to suffer) from sensory, motor, and cognitive losses. For instance, Marston *et al.*'s (2016) review finds that the papers published on older adults and video games between 2008 and 2013 focused either on older adults' difficulties in accessing the technology itself (because they are assumed to be disabled and/or unfamiliar with ITC) or in their inability to engage in play (because of

physiological and/or cognitive decline). This sustains the notion that older adults cannot play challenging games and have a strong preference for games that have simple mechanisms, decluttered graphics, no time pressure, and clear instructions. A game that features flashy visuals or relies on rapid reflexes is deemed inaccessible for older adults as a whole. Such assumptions disqualify entire genres of games: Real-Time Strategy games, shoot'em'ups, fighting games, Massively Multiplayer Online games, *etc.* The perception of older adults as conservative and easily shocked also drive the actors of the silver gamer network to forgo games deemed violent, combat-centred, or sexually suggestive, which are frequent features in video games associated with “hardcore” gaming. For similar reasons, silver gamer advocates endorse certain playing devices but not others. Actors who promote video games to older adults often opt for tablets, which they perceive as more accessible and intuitive because of their touch-activated interface. They also express interest in the possibilities offered by virtual reality headsets and custom-made controllers (e.g., Molina *et al.* 2014). Finally, the image of old age as a time of social isolation frames older adults as lonely people desperate for some social connection, ideally with young adults and children who can act as honorary grandchildren. Therefore, silver gamer advocates value social and cooperative games significantly more than solo or competitive play.

This model of older adults’ play shapes the opportunities for play that silver gamer advocates create. The *Golden-Age Games* project illustrates the prevalence of the silver gamer model for older adults’ digital play. Although the actors involved in *Golden-Age Games* have various perspectives on older adults’ play and different relationships with the silver gamer discourse, its administrators have designed the workshops in accordance with the medical literature’s recommendations. Workshops revolve around Wii consoles because they offer movement-based exergames with a setup designed to be simple and accessible. Workshops also include tablets because their touch-sensitive screens are expected to be particularly intuitive and easy to use. On tablets, organizers download games inspired by familiar card games and board games or patience games to minimize the amount of new information that participants have to process in order to play. For instance, games featured in the workshops include quizzes, *Scrabble*, hangman, dominos, checkers, crosswords, various puzzle games and memory games, battleships, mah-jong, *Triomino*, and *Solitaire*.

Faced with Nintendo’s request that they stop using the Wii in competitions, the *Golden-Age Games* administrators are attempting to find a successor to *Wii Bowling*. They have determined a series of criteria to that effect. Some pertain to esports, as the game must be spectacular and interesting enough to allow for proper competitions. But most factors relate to the silver gamer model: the game must have rules or mechanisms that are already familiar to most people (such as racing games, puzzles, sports games); it cannot rely on quick reflexes; it cannot contain storylines or visual elements that could be perceived as violent or sexual; and it must be able to claim potential health benefits or social features. These criteria reflect a desire to be inclusive and ensure that the oldest, most disabled players and/or those who are the least familiar with technology can participate in the workshops and competitions. They reveal the type of play that

is considered to be off limit for older adults, whether because of biological and physiological limitations or because of a lack of familiarity with digital technology:

[field notes from a discussion with a local coordinator] He tells me that they have to find a replacement for the Wii since Nintendo forbids them from using it during competitions. Apparently, the decision is due to Nintendo's frustration that they cannot capitalize on the hype surrounding *Golden-Age Games*, so they're trying to get the project to move onto other Nintendo games. But the coordinator tells me that it's actually quite tricky to find something appropriate and gives several examples. Mario Kart is a possibility, but there's too much going on on the screen and it makes the game too difficult for older players. Virtual Reality is nice; participants would enjoy VR museum visits, for instance. But people get vertigo, particularly when they're older, and it's not a social or collective kind of play. The Nintendo Switch console is another option, but the screen and controllers are way too small for older adults.

The silver gamer model postulates that older adults' digital play reflects a physiological and cognitive decline. It frames older adults' play as eminently unskilled, social, and instrumental. But the video game play of older adults, as observed in ethnographic studies and measured in statistical surveys, does not align with these assumptions. The Ludespace 2012 survey on video game players (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021), the literature on older adults who play video games (Pearce 2009; Quandt *et al.* 2009; De Schutter *et al.* 2014; Brown 2014), as well as my own research provide data that give a very different image of older adults' play. For instance, older players seldom mention their health as a motivation or benefit of their play (*cf.* Chapter 3.2.). They rarely play exergames and cognitive training games. Older adults generally play on computers and smartphones, instead of the tablets that feature prominently in the literature on older adults and video games. Finally, older adults' play is often solitary play and this isolation is even welcome insofar as it constitutes a break from everyday obligations.

Besides its analytical limitations, the silver gamer model does not account for the diversity of older adults' play as observed in the field and documented in the ethnographic literature. Older adults engage with video games differently depending on their individual circumstances, background, and position within the social world. Older adults are not just old: their intersecting identities and varied trajectories have led them to live very different lives up to and including old age (Calasanti 1996). The critical literature on aging has brought to light the complex ways in which old age interplays with gender, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, as well as professional careers or cultural backgrounds (d'Epina *et al.* 1983; Charpentier and Quéniart 2009; Rajan-Rankin 2018; Siverskog 2015). Therefore, although their play is shaped by a shared experience of old age, older players are not a monolith. The diversity of their experiences is reflected in the creativity of their play.

Homogeneous Preferences In Game Genres And Playing Device

In contrast with the model set by the silver gamer discourse, older adults' play centres around genres like puzzles, quizzes, and digital versions of well-known card or board games, often on computers or smartphones, on their own and over short play sessions. This is the statistically dominant play style among video game players in general, but players over sixty are particularly homogeneous in that regard and underrepresented in other genres or practices.

Before delving into the data on older adults' digital play, I note a methodological difficulty: there is no established categorization of video game genres. Each study has its own classification of video games, and this complicates the comparison between data from different sources (in this case, the Ludespace survey, ethnographic studies of older adults who play video games, and my own fieldwork). Different categories mentioned in the following analysis overlap, particularly in the case of casual games. A match-3 game like *Candy Crush* arguably counts as a patience game as well as a puzzle; a crossword app could be categorized as a traditional game, a word game, or a puzzle. This ambiguity does not undermine the analysis' results: adult players as a whole and older players specifically mostly play games that have similar mechanisms to widespread pen-and-paper, card, or board games, rather than the roleplaying games or First Person Shooters that are most often associated with the idea of video games.

In terms of game genres, the video game play of older adults is relatively similar to the video game play of the general population. According to the Ludespace study, the genres that are most popular among older adults are the same genres that are most popular with adult players overall (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). About 60% of respondents over 18 who played at least once over the year had played patience games; so did about 70% of older players. *Solitaire* is mentioned by 13% of all adult players among their top three games. The most played genres after patience games, both for players in general and older players in particular, are the following: card games (such as tarot or poker), word and number-placement games (such as *WordBrain* or sudokus), and brain teasers and quizzes (such as *Capitales du monde*). Alongside these all-time favourites, other genres are much less represented in general and particularly among older adults. While these games are relatively well represented in one specific demographic (about 20% of men between 18 and 34 have played an MMORPG or MOBA game over the course of the year), they remain marginal in the practices of players overall. Among older players, the proportion of MMORPG and MOBA players falls below 5%.

Older adults' video game play is less diversified than other players'. In the general population of players, a few genres overwhelmingly dominate the scene, but the practice remains relatively varied in the sense that other categories of games involve significant numbers of players. Music and dance games, platform games, and simulation games are well-represented among adult players. For instance, 8,9% of adult players (over 18) had played the dancing game *Just Dance* at least once during the previous year. Some genres like the aforementioned RPG/MOBA games but also war games and First Person Shooters (FPS) are rare among players as a whole but very well represented in specific groups. For instance, over 50% of 25- to 34-year-old male players have played an FPS at least once over the course of the year. The strong decrease of these

practices with age leads to a particularly contrasted situation among players over sixty. The large majority of older players exclusively play patience games, card games, word and number games, and brain teasers, while no other genre scores more than 5% among older players.

The literature on older adults who play video games confirms the prevalence of patience, puzzle, and traditional games in older players' practices. Puzzle and traditional games are mentioned in most case studies on older adults and video games as well as in the present study's sample. The puzzle genre includes word- or number-placement puzzles and match-3 games. Among interviewees of the present study, this category is represented by smartphone games such as *Candy Crush* or *Gummy Drop* and computer games such as online sudoku. The phrase "traditional games" is a misnomer insofar as it creates an artificial boundary between tradition and innovation in games, but it is a widespread way of referring to video games whose mechanisms mimic previously existing and well-known board games or card games¹⁷¹. Examples include *Solitaire* or tarot, which are both played by interviewees. These two genres, puzzle and traditional games, are often mentioned in the literature on older adults' practices, notably in Nap *et al.* (2009), McLaughlin *et al.* (2012), de Schutter (2011), and Kaufman *et al.* (2016). In Kaufman *et al.*'s sample of 463 participants, the most played genres were puzzle games (33%) and card, board and tile games (17%). In the present study, 7 interviewees play puzzle games (in the broadest sense of the term and including match-3 games; examples include *Tetris*, *Candy Crush*, *Gummy Drop*) and 8 play traditional games (mostly *Scrabble*, *Solitaire*, sudoku, crosswords, and mah-jong). A third of the sample exclusively plays games in these categories. In the *Golden-Age Games* workshops, the participants who play video games on tablets exclusively play games that pertain to these genres in addition to a few quiz games.

The modalities and parameters of older adults' video game play are also relatively homogeneous. Older players play mostly at home, in short bursts, but nearly every day, thus playing overall more hours on average than younger age groups (Delwiche and Henderson 2013). This reflects the prevalent patterns in the video game play of adult players as a whole. For instance, according to the Ludespace study, 86% of players over 18 say that they play at home (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). There is however one difference between older gamers and the general adult population: video game play is significantly more solitary for older adults than for players in general. Indeed, "[t]he proportion of individuals who exclusively play on their own [...] significantly increases with age. It represents only 2% of 14–17-year-olds, compared with 11% of 25–34 year-olds and up to 53% of 60 year-olds and over" (n.p., my own translation). In that sense, older adults' practices are anchored in the context of old age, including smaller social networks and a re-centring on the domestic space.

Material circumstances affects players' choices in terms of equipment and play practices. Factors such as class or income level have a significant influence on individuals' decision to play on a device or another. Although class-based variations in video game practices tend to recede, some differences persist, particularly when it comes to players' equipment (Ter

¹⁷¹cf. Chapter 1, footnote 11.

Minassian *et al.* 2021). Members of the upper-middle class (professionals and executives) play more frequently on computers than workers and employees; the reverse is true for consoles. For its part, gender is a significant factor in play frequency, game genre, and equipment preferences. Women own and use consoles much less than men; they are less likely to play certain genres such as roleplaying games and First Person Shooters; and they are noticeably less likely to play every day or even every week. Although there is no available data that combines age, class, and gender, I hypothesize that older adults play differently depending on their social position. In that regard, I expect older adults' play to be structured by the same fault lines as the general population of video game players. It is reasonable to imagine that class, gender, race, and disability, among other elements, continue to matter in digital play after sixty years old.

However, it is unclear how the intersection of social positions and identities factors in older adults' play. None of the expected patterns concerning gender or class emerge in the available data. Among interviewees, for instance, the two dedicated players who play respectively *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *World of Warcraft* every day for several hours are women. The only interviewee who owns and uses a console is a woman while everyone else plays on either or both their computer and their smartphone, with no clear distinction across class, income, or education levels. This echoes the literature on gender and technology in old age, such as Delias' (2019) and Buse's (2010) work on the gendered domestication of computers in old age, which emphasizes the unexpected advantages that women and particularly working-class women who worked secretarial jobs possess regarding ICT uses in old age. Old age complicates existing fault lines across social groups. Usual determinants such as class and gender affect older players in more convoluted and uncertain ways than they do other players.

Diverse Play Styles And Configurations

Although older adults' play is relatively uniform (particularly from a statistical point of view), older adults engage with video games in diverse and creative ways. The literature on older video game players brings to light the ways in which older adults invest different forms of play with a variety of practices and meanings. Pearce's (2008) study of the *GameBoomers* forum, a forum geared towards video game players over 50, illustrates that older gamers are not a homogeneous group that can be reduced to a single genre or playstyle. Of the 313 members of the forum who responded to the survey, a third had participated in beta-testing a game (testing a game before its final release) at least once, 30% played Massively Multiplayer Online games daily, 28% played between 20 and 40 hours a week and 41% played between midnight and 2AM. Their preference went to roleplay and adventure games (66%), action and shooter games (60%), and casual games such as matching games (60%) in equal proportions. A testament to the heterogeneity of older games, even studies with small sample sizes have a proportion of respondents interested in genres outside of traditional and puzzle games, such as flight and tank simulators or shooting games. In De Schutter's (2011:160) study, while 80% of respondents reported playing games categorized as casual (chiefly puzzle and traditional games),

The remaining 20% of the sample reported many different genres among their favorite games, including shooting games (e.g., *Call of Duty*), action–adventure games (e.g., *Splinter Cell*), simulation games (e.g., *Simcity*), platform games (e.g., *Jak and Daxter*), racing games (e.g., *Gran Turismo*), sports games (e.g., *FIFA*), massively multiplayer online games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), role-playing games (e.g., *Oblivion*), and adventure games (e.g., *Myst*).

Practices are quite diverse among interviewees as well. While the expected genres are prevalent in the group, with 11 out of 16 respondents regularly playing puzzle and/or traditional games, they organize these commonplace practices and other, more unexpected ones into various configurations that support different play styles.

A first category includes the sample’s two self-identified hardcore gamers. Martine and Sylvie both spent several hours a day on average playing respectively a roleplaying game (*Zelda: Breath of the Wild*) and a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (*World of Warcraft*). On the side, they engage in a variety of games that are less demanding in terms of time investment, particularly point’n’click and hidden object mystery games like the *Dark Parables* series or *The Secret Society*. Both also regularly try other roleplaying games for short amounts of time before coming back to their main game. Martine has installed the Japanese roleplaying game *Final Fantasy VIII* remake on her Switch, and Sylvie briefly played the massively multiplayer online game *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.

A second category includes interviewees who consistently play the same casual game nearly every day in short bursts as part of their routine or as a break or reward from their work and obligations. Isabelle plays *Cooking Fever* and Christine plays *Gummy Drop* on their smartphone, Yvette plays sudoku on her tablet (and occasionally on her computer), and Michel plays *Solitaire 250+* on his home computer. Marie has a similar practice, only she alternates between two games, *Candy Crush* on her tablet and *Jardin des Mots* on her smartphone.

A third, more heterogeneous category includes interviewees who play several games at once, sometimes all within the same genre and sometimes across a variety of genres. Alain plays flight simulators, the online strategy and management game *Forge of Empires*, older games on emulators, computer chess, and a casual platform/runner game on his phone. Nicole plays restaurant- and home decoration-themed management games (*HomeScapes* and *Chez Moi*) alongside traditional games like mah-jong and *Solitaire*. Dominique and Bernard cite about fifteen games between the two of them. Dominique regularly plays puzzles and traditional games like *Solitaire* and *Scrabble* and Bernard has a flight simulator. Together, they play the strategy game *Dominion* and occasionally try out the games that their son brings with him when he visits.

The last subset of respondents alternates between several games that belong to the same genre on the same platform. Nathalie plays puzzles, quizzes, and traditional games (*Scrabble*, *Capitales du Monde*, and *Pro des Mots*) on her smartphone as does Chantal (who plays online

quiz games such as *Ruzzle* and *DuelQuizz*) and Christophe (digital chess and a match-3 similar to *Candy Crush*). Philippe, who exclusively plays flight simulators and has never tried any other game, is in a category of his own.

This categorization of interviewees' play only reflects their current involvement in video game play. Most of them have played other games, in other genres, with different play styles, on other devices in the past. On paper, their play does correspond to the expectations set by quantitative data on older adults' video game play, but in practice, there is no unified "older video game player" profile that emerges from a close analysis of the sample. In summary, the diversity in older adults' video game play should be neither overstated nor erased. The social and material circumstances of old age shape play but do not determine it. Older adults creatively engage with their limited access to video games and produce original play configurations.

5.2. Hierarchies Of Play

In the spaces and communities dedicated to video games, some identities and play styles hold more value than others. This section focuses on older adults' position within the field of video games, particularly in relation to other video game players and gaming cultures. The representations associated with older adults (in terms of age but also gender) and the prevalence of certain preferences among older players situate them at the margins of these social worlds.

Video Game Culture(s)

Older adults' video game play exists within a distinct culture or rather set of cultures. Game studies scholars have paid close attention to video game culture(s) as a structuring phenomenon in players' experiences (Mäyrä 2008). Kirkpatrick (2013) situates the emergence of a distinct video game culture in the 1980s and highlights the role of the specialized computer and game press into conferring cultural autonomy to the field of video games. As Shaw (2010) demonstrates, however, the concept is limited insofar as it is seldom questioned or nuanced in game studies, whose scholars often identify as part of the culture. Indeed, “[w]hat does it mean to have a culture defined by the consumption of a particular medium?” (p. 404) In practice, the diversity among players brings about different sets of norms, representations, and communities.

Nonetheless, the notion of a distinct video game culture remains widely used both in academia and specific spaces and communities driven by players, industry members, and other actors who are involved in the promotion of video games. Carbone and Ruffino (2012) propose to use the tools of subcultural theory to make sense of this elusive video game culture. Their work points to the distinction between three understandings of video game culture as a space of identity formation and normative production. Firstly, in an anthropological sense, video game culture is the ensemble of meaning-making, creative and productive activities that players engage in and that creates a distinct cultural space: player-produced machinima (short movies filmed inside a video game) or fan art constitute artifacts of that culture. Secondly, video game culture is a constellation of subcultures that relate to different genres, audiences, play styles, or even game franchises: there are communities of Japanese roleplaying games fan, Nintendo gamers, or retro gamers. Thirdly, a distinct “gamer culture” built around a specific identity and play style has become increasingly visible within and outside of the field of video games.

The term “gamer” refers to video game players who claim their practice as an identity marker, who occupy specific offline and online spaces, and who value a particular video game practice. This practice, sometimes described as “hardcore”, is associated with certain genres (such as shooting games, fighting games, and MMORPGs) and norms that value an intensive, competitive, highly skilled practice. This paradigmatic gamer culture emerges at the crossroads of several elements: moral panics characterizing video game players as deviant, but also player communities' reclaiming and flaunting of that stigmatized identity, as well as the gaming industry's efforts to establish their products as subversive and counter-cultural.

Although it encompasses a relatively small proportion of video game players, gamer culture has a structuring role in the field of video games. It constitutes a reference for some of its most influential actors either as a foil or as a model. The figure of the gamer (as a deviant, addicted, and violent teenager) fuels anxieties about what video games do to their vulnerable players and translates into political debates and policy decisions about youth and digital media. The game industry and particularly its AAA segment (producing blockbuster games with large budgets) still largely focus on self-identified gamers as their main audience, and this shapes the decisions made regarding the production and marketing of high-profile games. Local communities of players have turned discussions about video games and their players into debates and scandals that reinforce narrow notions of the proper way to play video games (Consalvo 2012).

Gamer culture's influence extends to video game players who cannot or do not want to identify as gamers. Fron *et al.* draw attention to the ways in which economic and cultural power structures (which they largely trace back to the video game industry) have imposed a narrow definition of what counts as a video game and as a player, which the authors call the hegemony of play (2007). Gamer culture indeed perpetuates and reinforces representations of players and norms of play with which players have to contend both within and outside of video game culture and spaces (Vossen 2018). Older players are no exception in that regard. Their complex relationship with the figure of the young and deviant gamer highlights that they are not outside of the reach of gamer culture. The latter also establishes a hierarchy of play styles and game genres that devalues the practices that are most prevalent among older adults who play video games.

Gamer culture is closely associated with hardcore play and its emphasis on intensive involvement and mastery of games with high barriers to entry. An exact definition of hardcore play is difficult to pin down as it is less a descriptive category than a normative (and contested) representation that plays a decisive role in the boundary-making of certain communities and spaces. In their attempt to identify objective markers of hardcore play, Loporcaro, Ortega, and Egnoto (2014) find a number of heterogeneous features. Markers include games with intimidating characters, players who spend large amounts of money on their play, or gaming devices that allow for HD graphics and online interactions. Hardcore play is in large part a practice defined in contrast to other, less valued play styles, and particularly in opposition to casual play. The latter constitutes a similarly broad category encompassing various genres, play styles, and devices. It stands at the bottom rung of the hierarchization of video games in gaming culture and, to an extent, in the industry — to the point that gamers may argue that casual games are not real games (Vanderhoef 2013). Casual games let players engage in short play sessions and do not rely on players' long-term and intensive engagement. Juul (2010) argues that a game is casual if it is possible to play it for five or ten minutes and still find the experience enjoyable, while hardcore games demand preparation, training, and long play sessions in order to be fun. Casual games do not demand heavy commitment from the player, but it is entirely possible to play a casual game in a hardcore way, with extensive research on the best strategies and hours-

long sessions. Still, casual games do not align with the values of complexity, exceptionalism, and sacrifice that hardcore play represents.

Casual play also suffers from its association with players who do not correspond to the figure of the gamer, particularly middle-aged women (Vanderhoef 2013). Hardcore play pertains to themes and representations as well as game mechanics: it is

characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination. (Fron *et al.* 2007:7)

Kirkpatrick (2016:1447) highlights that the “hardcore” moniker results from the reversal and reclaiming of stigma attached to video games by 1990s moral panics:

The key development here is the way that gaming discourse incorporates the pathologizing terms that had been used to label computer culture and makes them into signs of authenticity. A true game is addictive and a real gamer is an avowed junkie.

The emergence of a semi-autonomous culture around video games has generated an identity that is associated with a specific play style (an intensive and demanding practice of video games) and a set of representations (related to masculinity and youth). The gamer identity is defined in large part by its inaccessibility. It draws on a discourse of mastery and sacrifice that establishes the gamer as an exceptional individual. It is thus decisive for communities and players who define themselves as gamers to conduct boundary-making work. As Fron *et al.* (2007:1) note,

self-selected hardcore “gamers” [...] have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to “minority” players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

Shaw calls attention to the power dynamics that determine who counts as a gamer (2010). As Shaw (2013: n.p.) demonstrates, “gamer identity as a construction and performance is closed off for some players and in particular contexts”, both because of dominant representations of the gamer as a white, male, able-bodied teenager or young adult and because of the requirements of hardcore play in terms of time and money. Vossen (2018) proposes the notion of “cultural inaccessibility” to describe the symbolical barriers that affect women’s ability to engage with games and the surrounding communities and cultures.

Video game players do not necessarily strive to become gamers. This identity is exclusive and associated with a form of play that prompts anxieties about violence and addiction. Shaw (2013) interrogates the role of the gamer identity in discussions about video game culture. In reaction to the exclusionary and noxious aspects of gaming culture, scholars and activists have often

proposed to expand the gamer category to include players who do not fit with its representations. Yet Shaw highlights that many players do not care for this identity and would not necessarily benefit from an expansion of its boundaries: “What happens to arguments for representation when players are not that invested in the medium?” (n.p.) The debate about the representation of diverse identities and bodies in and around video games fails to account for the widespread lack of interest in (or aversion towards) gamer culture among video game players. As Phillips and Ruberg (2018: n.p.) note in their commentary on queer resistance in video games and the pitfalls of inclusion, “[i]f “gamer” culture is homophobic, misogynistic, and racist, why would we want to fight for the right to belong within it?”

Is There Such A Thing As An Older Gamer?

Older adults who play video games occupy an uncomfortable position within the spaces and communities dedicated to video games. They find it difficult to inhabit the gamer identity because of the discrepancy between their age and the gamer figure, which is compounded by the incongruity associated with adult play. Moreover, the play styles that are prevalent among older players fall at the bottom of the hierarchy established by gamer culture, and many older players are women and face additional barriers as a result. Older adults are simultaneously a minority among video game players in the quantitative sense and a minority within video game cultures in terms of identity. They exist at the periphery of its spaces and communities, when they are not entirely absent from them:

[field notes from a video game convention] I spent the last three days hanging around the *Golden-Age Games* booth. Since I had a lot of time on my hands, I spend quite a lot of time people-watching and specifically looking for people who “looked old”. I only saw one person fitting this description: a man with grey hair walking through the convention with a young boy next to him. Perhaps I’m just very bad at guessing people’s age, but the result is the same: everyone here looks young, with the exception of some of the officials and executives who visited the convention yesterday. And the *Golden-Age Games* teams, obviously.

This does not preclude older adults who play video games from trying to make their way into gamer culture spaces and communities. In Sylvie’s case, the process is relatively successful: Sylvie is part of a guild and recently became its leader, maintains relationships with her guild members outside of the game, and frequents forums and websites dedicated to theorycrafting and *World of Warcraft* news. Sylvie expresses no frustration or regret regarding her involvement in gamer culture. In contrast, Martine invests the identity of gamer (and explicitly calls herself one) but cannot find gamer friends. Video game play is important for Martine who values the time she spends playing and her in-game achievements. During the interview, she shows off her combat equipment, the house she bought and decorated, her inventory, her mastery of the game’s lore, as well as her knowledge of the *Zelda* franchise. But even though Martine contacted one of the main French professional associations for video games companies, gaming

YouTube channels, a well-known forum dedicated to video games, and other groups, she hardly received any answer and did not establish solid relationships with other players.

Older players occasionally find their way into gamer spaces. Several interviewees read forums and websites dedicated to the game they play and watch walkthroughs, let's play, and commentary videos on YouTube. They also show an interest in video game culture or its production, like Alain who discusses at length the importance of game engines and graphic design in games. For Dominique and Bernard, whose son is a game designer, video games are cultural works produced by experts that deserve some recognition:

And when he comes here, I watch him play, he gives me information about the game. He creates games himself, in fact, he makes them, he invents them. He also gives me information about why the light [is like this in the game], how the light, he analyzes the games he creates.¹⁷²

Older adults who play video games have a complex relationship with the gamer identity. With the exception of Martine and Sylvie, interviewees are wary of gamers and uncomfortable with being perceived like one. The identity is both incongruous and undesirable to them because it clashes with the identity of “adult” that they try to maintain. Christine exemplifies this ambivalent attitude: she defines herself as “being very much a player” and sees her smartphone games as the continuation of “having played a lot throughout her life”. But she limits her play in order not to become too much of a video game player. Christine refuses to spend any money on video games and abandons games when she gets too absorbed. She stopped playing *Candy Crush* when she got a new phone: she could have downloaded it again but decided against it to prove that she was “not an addict”. In direct contrast with the values that underline hardcore play, Christine is careful not to get invested in video games and disciplines her practice to keep it strictly casual. For instance, Christine tried playing *Pokémon Go* on the advice of a friend but soon stopped: “I had the feeling I was, I was getting dumb, well, I told myself, no, no, I won't get into that thing. [...] And on top of it, I felt I was captive of that thing.¹⁷³” De Schutter & Vanden Abeele (2010: n.p.) observe this ambivalence in older video game players: “they did not consider themselves to be gamers, as they associated that term with younger players.”

In contrast, the *Golden-Age Games* project advocates for older adults to be considered proper video game players and even gamers, particularly through their participation in esports competitions. While the interest in esports is uneven among *Golden-Age Games* actors, it is a core aspect of the project, as one of its founders is a major French video game convention. The resulting emphasis on competition (including local tournaments, one of the three requirements that the association has towards host institutions) and console play structures the workshops.

¹⁷²“Et quand il vient ici je le regarde jouer, il me donne les indications dans le jeu, il construit lui-même des jeux d'ailleurs, il en fabrique, il en invente. Il me donne aussi des indications sur pourquoi les lumières, comment les lumières, il décortique les jeux qu'il invente.”

¹⁷³“J'ai eu l'impression d'être, de m'abrutir, enfin, je me suis dit, Non non, je ne vais pas rentrer dans ce truc-là. [...] Et puis j'avais l'impression d'être captive de quelque chose.”

The regional tournaments at the end of the year illustrate the project's ambition to bring older adults into the spaces and practices of hardcore gaming. They take place during video game conventions, on the same stage as other competitions, in the same atmosphere set by pulsing bass boosts and gyrating spotlights. The two commentators who stay on stage for the duration of the competition make sure to frame the tournament as an esports event. They use the vocabulary of streaming or esports commentary: the *Golden-Age Games* association is described as "the best gaming house" (in reference to the houses shared by esports teams who train and live together), a commentator says of the volunteer that "behind every great player is a great coach", and a risky throw is described as a "clutch" or an illustration of the "more risk, more reward" strategy. Spectators play along:

[field notes from a competition] The commentator gets the audience to chant "Straight a-head! Straight a-head!" in reference to the ideal trajectory for the ball. The bleachers are packed, and the audience is very responsive. They clap along, follow the chants that the commentator starts (sometimes with the names of the players: "Mo-nique! Mon-nique!"), and occasionally start their own chants. A spectator sitting next to me yells "Let go of the button!" to a participant who's struggling.

Framing the tournaments as esports events legitimizes participants' play as skillful, exceptional, captivating, and invested, that is, proper hardcore gaming.

The *Golden-Age Games* local and regional competitions reproduce a hardcore/casual dichotomy. Regional competitions take place in spaces dedicated to video games while local competitions take place in aged care institutions or neighbourhood centres. In regional competitions, the setup is high-tech and spectacular. In local competitions, rooms are decorated with hand-painted posters and balloons, the music comes from tiny speakers when there is any, and technical difficulties abound. In regional competitions, the audience is large and mostly made of convention-goers, while local competitions are attended by participants, a few public figures invited by local coordinators, and relatives of the participants and volunteers. The main discrepancy between local and regional competitions pertains to the attitude of the audience and organizers. In regional competitions, *Golden-Age Games* organizers (often administrators or representatives of the association's partners) endeavour to convince spectators and officials that this really is an esports competition with skilled players and a competitive mindset. They take participants seriously as players and the two commentators who stay onstage during the competition reinforce this impression. The audience is engaged in the matches, which happen one at a time, and closely follows each of their twists and turns. While there are some comings and goings, most audience members stay seated from the beginning to the end.

In local competitions, organizers (often local coordinators and leisure supervisors) focus on the fun and social aspect of the event. At the local scale, the prevalence of the silver gamer discourse leads to an emphasis on intergenerational socialization and health benefits rather than competition and game-related skills. Organizers and sometimes participants themselves refuse

to take the tournament and its results too seriously. What matters is that participants are there and have fun, not that they win:

[field notes from a local competition] A player asks: “How are we doing?” The volunteer answers: “... You can play against two other teams.” The player asks again and the volunteer gives the same answer with a nervous laugh. He clearly doesn’t want to tell her the team’s lousy score. He adds “It doesn’t matter, it’s a friendly competition.”

Local competitions also constitute an opportunity to gather the local partners, patrons, and supporters of the *Golden-Age Games* project. While the audience (mostly made up of participants and residents who have not been selected to play on stage) sits down for the duration of the tournament, organizers tend to move around the room. They attend to the players, solve technical difficulties, greet officials and journalists, talk among each other, and take pictures to produce promotional material for the association. They experience the competition differently from other audience members, less like an esports competition and more like a festive occasion:

[field notes from a local competition] There are (more or less) 93 people in the room, including a dozen “officials” (representatives from institutions and partners, elected officials, senior officials, *etc.*) They all sit in the same corner of the bleachers, although they often get up and walk around the room, chatting and taking pictures, even during the games. [...] There are three matches going on at the same time. In the corner where all the “officials” sit, people clap and yell every time there is a strike, whatever the team. Other audience members seem to be more selective in their support. Officials are much noisier than the rest of the audience and seem to be having a lot of fun.

Additionally, local competitions are organized in a makeshift manner that contrasts with the professional setup of regional tournaments integrated into video game conventions. Local coordinators let volunteers plan the competitions to let them try their hand at event management. Their choices in staging and scorekeeping are often confusing, for instance when volunteers plan for several matches to happen at once or propose no running commentary of the scores and matches. Therefore, the audience struggles to follow the unfolding of the competition, as whispered questions between audience members show. In sum, even within *Golden-Age Games*, a project dedicated to integrating older adults into esports, the notion that older adults can be gamers has limited success. The discrepancy between the figure of the young, male, deviant gamer and representations of old age is challenging, in addition to older players’ disinterest in becoming gamers.

The Unstable Intersection Of Gender, (Old) Age, And Video Games

Older adults who play video games are overwhelmingly women. To contextualize the next section, which examines the specificity of older women’s video game play, this section

considers how gender matters in the respective experience of video game play and old age. Women are marginalized in gaming cultures and spaces. As for old age, it interacts with gender in intricate ways, complicating norms and representations of masculinity and femininity.

Most of the older adults who play video games are women. There is no quantitative data available to approximate the proportion of women among older players, but studies on older adults and video game all reach this conclusion. The most telling example is Delwiche *et al.*'s work (2003), which gathers data from a sample of 30 000 players of an MMORPG, and focuses on the 8% over 50 years old. The authors observe a gender inversion between the under-50 and the over-50 sample, with respectively 36% and 62% of women in each group. Several other works on older players note the same departure from gendered norms around video games, such as de Schutter (2011), whose respondents include 57% of women. I found similar results in my study of a video game workshop in a Parisian cultural centre, whose fifteen members were all older women (Lavenir, 2022).

In both the fieldwork sites that I present here, there are significantly more women than men. In the *Golden-Age Games* workshops, women are an overwhelming majority among players and among organizers. During the opening speeches of a regional competition, the representative of a prestigious *Golden-Age Games* partner organization jokes that gender equity is achieved among “our elders” because 6 of the 8 competing champions are women. In the *Golden-Age Games* workshops¹⁷⁴, two-thirds of the people involved in the workshops (including participants, organizers, spectators, and relatives or friends) were women, as were three quarters of the 172 participants. Several of the thirty workshops were exclusively attended by women while no *Golden-Age Games* event was exclusively attended by men. The sample of interviewees follows a similar trend with 11 women out of 16 respondents. The high proportion of women in the *Golden-Age Games* workshops may result from the over-representation of women in older age groups and the gendered pattern in older adults’ attendance to group activities. As for interviewees, these factors possess less explanatory power given that interviewees are relatively young (the average age is 70 years old¹⁷⁵) and play at home on their own. In any case, women are a majority among older video game players, and this has repercussions on older adults’ position in gaming communities and spaces.

The marginality of older players is interwoven with the exclusion of women from gamer culture. There are as many women as men who play video games in the general population, but women engage with the practice in a distinct way characterized by lower visibility and legitimacy (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). Women have a more limited and difficult access to the industry, spaces, and communities dedicated to video games (Schott and Horrell 2000; Cassell and Jenkins 2000;

¹⁷⁴ Because direct interactions were not easily possible, I relied on exterior cues relative to gender identity (such as the name and pronouns used by the individuals themselves and those who addressed them) to determine the number of men and women. According to these elements, no one identified as outside of the gender binary, so the two categories of men and women were retained in the analysis.

¹⁷⁵ According to INSEE’s 2022 data, while there are slightly more women than men among 70-year-old individuals (women represent 53% of the group), the imbalance is considerably more important in older age groups (with for instance 61% of women among individuals aged 85).

Bryce and Rutter 2005; Thornham 2008, 2011; Consalvo 2012). Vossen (2018:1) highlights the gendered cultural inaccessibility of video games:

While games may be physically available for girls and women to purchase and play, the culture surrounding game play privileges boys and men as players and makes it unquestionably less welcoming and accessible to girls and women.

The crux of this inaccessibility is the barriers set against women and girls' domestication of the technology and accumulation of gaming capital and mastery. Girls are less encouraged and more limited in their use of the computer and other digital technology as they grow up, women avoid playing in public because their involvement in video games has the potential to trigger mockery or harassment, and the absence or stereotyping of women as game characters intensifies a sense of not belonging. Thornham (2011) documents the ways in which women who play video games inhabit this uncomfortable position, often by defaulting to the role of spectator or by performing incompetency and ditziness. This lets them contend with the "wider marketing, discursive and visual elements of the game" that establish the notion that they do not belong in spaces and communities of play (p. 55). Coville's (2017) study of exhibitions dedicated to video games in museums and cultural centres highlights the importance of gender in visitors' experience. The curators define a script (materialized in the texts, setup, and interactive devices) that positions women as unfamiliar and wary of video games. Women thus find themselves assigned to devalued and marginalized identities, such as the girlfriend who reluctantly accompanies her partner, as soon as they enter the space of the exhibition.

Women's complex relationship with video games reflects the gendering of technology as a whole. Technology, particularly when it is branded as new, is coded as masculine through its design, uses, and representations (Hodgkinson 2000). Information and communication technology in particular shapes and is shaped by gendered power relations and social constructs (Jouët 2003). The cultural construction of technology as masculine discourages women from investing and forging close relationships with digital technology, even when they are skilled and competent users (Turkle 1988).

Gender matters at every stage of the life course, particularly for women, and not only regarding technology uses. Gendered expectations have affected interviewees' possibilities in terms of studies, careers, family, and leisure. Women's lives in old age are shaped by the accumulation of choices and experiences that have stemmed from their gendered position. Several interviewees have a similar experience to Marie, who had to interrupt her studies and career when she married her first husband (whom she divorced in her forties):

And so I wanted to be an English teacher, but well, at this point, my father tells me, "You've already cost us enough with your studies and you see all your siblings coming up after you." And most importantly he said that women would never work and that she

would have a husband who would earn a living for her. Well, it sure didn't work out like that.¹⁷⁶

Six out of the eleven women interviewed had either divorced, separated, or become widows in their thirties or forties. Three of them had been housewives and started working late in life, most often to financially support themselves and their children when they separated from their spouses. Yvette had been forced to interrupt her studies when she got engaged to her late husband and even had to hide her discussions with a former teacher from him. Several decades later, Yvette obtained her husband's permission to go back to university and get a part-time job as a Spanish teacher in high school. As Yvette's husband spent most of his time at the racetracks,

So finally I blackmailed my husband a little bit. [...] I said to him, either you spend every second weekend with me. One weekend you do as you like, the next weekend is for me. Or I go back to school. [...] So he told me to go back to school.¹⁷⁷

Women's experiences in the workplace are similarly marked by gendered inequalities. Dominique recalls how difficult her job as a journalist for a local newspaper was because of the men she had to work with: "Very macho. I was harassed a lot in my line of work, but well, I have a strong personality, so I managed. But still, I was quite affected by my relationship with my colleagues."¹⁷⁸ Women are also more likely to have dedicated important amounts of time to caring for their sick spouses or parents. Marie became, in her own words, a nurse for her late husband in the last years of his life. She also took in her disabled elder sister several afternoons a week until her sister died, and later went on to babysit an acquaintance's young child one day a week for nearly a decade. Yvette similarly cared for her elderly mother and siblings. Chantal regularly visits her uncle and brings him groceries. Overall, women's access to leisure in general and to specific leisure practices is constrained (Deem 1986). Women over 65 spend significantly more time on domestic work and less time on leisure than men (Delbès and Gaymu 1995).

Nonetheless, older women's experience of gender is mediated by their age in ways that radicalize their relationship with womanhood. It makes valued performances of femininity and masculinity inaccessible (Schwaiger 2006). Aging considerably unsettles individuals' ability to perform gender (Siverskog 2015). The interconnection between cultural norms of beauty and notions such as youthfulness, sexuality, and fertility inexorably frame older men and women as physically unattractive. Old age also feminizes aging bodies by positioning them as weak and unable to control themselves and maintain their boundaries. This position evokes the figure of

¹⁷⁶“Et donc je voulais être prof d'anglais, mais bon, à ce moment-là mon père me dit, ‘Tu as coûté assez dans les études, et comme tu vois toute la marmaille qu’il y a derrière toi’. Et puis il m’a surtout dit que les femmes ne travailleraient pas et qu’elle aurait surtout un mari qui gagnerait sa vie pour elles. Bon chose qui ne s’est pas confirmée, bien sûr.”

¹⁷⁷“Alors finalement j’ai fait un petit chantage à mon mari. [...] Alors je lui ai dit, ou bien tu me consacres un week-end sur deux. Un week-end tu fais ce que tu veux, le week-end d’après c’est pour moi. Ou bien je reprends mes études. [...] Donc il m’a dit de reprendre mes études.”

¹⁷⁸“Très machistes. J’ai été beaucoup harcelée dans mon travail, mais bon, j’ai du caractère, donc je m’en suis sortie. Mais j’ai quand même pas mal souffert de mes rapports avec les collègues.”

the abject female body: “the ageing of men is aligned with femininity through ‘lack’ of bodily control[;] men become ‘the other’, joining the non-privileged half of the gender binary that women have (always, already) been subsumed under” (Schwaiger 2006:29). Overall, older adults are limited to the most devalued forms of gender expression.

The experience of gender in old age is further complicated by the distribution of men and women in each age group. Women’s longer life expectancy significantly impacts the gender distribution in older age groups: 52% of 60-year-olds are women, a proportion that reaches 58% for 80-year-olds and 77% for 90-year-olds (according to 2019 INSEE data). Older women are also more visible than older men and more present in public spaces, which further feminizes representations of old age. Older women are significantly more involved in collective leisure activities, as Marhánková’s (2014) work on senior centres shows. Charpentier *et al.* (2014) note that it is generally women who initiate collective action and social spaces for older adults. Projects such as the *Babayaga* self-managed nursing home or the “*Mémés Déchainées*” movement are exclusively for women, and there is no equivalent for men. Even the successful aging discourse contributes to the over-representation of women among older adults, insofar as “the very principles on which the discourse on active ageing is based share a number of common elements with the mechanisms with which femininity is constructed and embodied” (Marhánková 2014:1490).

Casual And Feminized Older Players

Gender matters in older adults’ video game play, as older women’s accounts of their play illustrate. Nonetheless, the experience of women in games is precarious at all ages. Older women too have to deal with unwanted sexual advances interactions, limited access to technology (particularly in the domestic space), and assumptions about their lack of interest or proficiency. The intersection of old age and womanhood reinforces the marginalization of women in gaming spaces and communities because their representations converge in some regards, for instance in the depiction of women and older adults as clueless tech users or incongruous gamers. Yet this intersection also yields unexpected resources for older women who play video games.

Older women who play video games face the same challenges as their younger peers, particularly in terms of limited access to technology and exclusionary interactions around games. Both in interviews and during workshops, gendered power relations shape older women’s experience of video games. The social dynamics in which video game play is embedded constantly remind players that “it’s a boy thing” (Thornham 2008). In a workshop, the leisure supervisor encourages one of the men to play well because he must “Show that men are always superior!” Chantal recounts repeated sexual advances on her online quiz game:

Ah yes, yes, yes, listen, I had at least three, three, three men, ah yes yes. You see, it was “Are you beautiful? What do you look like? Are you this or that?” [...] “Are you thinking about me”, stuff like this¹⁷⁹.

Interviewees’ relationship with technology is often mediated by the men around them: companions or teenage and adult sons play instrumental roles in bringing new technology home, but also mark them as their own territory. Isabelle’s ex-partner bought a handheld console on which they both played extensively, but he took it with him during military service and materially put a stop to Isabelle’s play. Nicole had computers and video games at home long before she actually started playing with colleagues at work: “It’s my husband. It’s him who always got that. I began much, much later. [...] It’s him who used that, the kids used that. I, I wasn’t really interested in it.¹⁸⁰”

The material setup of interviewees’ play highlights gendered inequalities in access to technology and specifically video games. Gendered power relations play out in technology through the use of space and material access to devices, particularly in domestic spaces (Thornham 2011; Harvey 2015). Among interviewees, women tend to play in shared spaces such as the living room or the kitchen, on small and portable devices that can be put away easily. Men tend to play in rooms of their own, such as their office or a dedicated room. These spaces provide a private play space away from other household members and allow for more cumbersome setups such as a console or a desktop computer. Philippe plays in his attic on a computer equipped with custom flight simulators commands and a VR headset:

So in fact it’s in my attic, I, I installed a car seat, and in there I have my computer next to me, and I have a control stick, I have foot-operated controls, what we call a rudder, I have a throttle lever, it seems surprising but in fact they’re from an American fighter jet, it still exists.¹⁸¹

Both Michel and Bernard play in their office, behind a closed door. Alain has reserved a whole room for his tech uses: “I have a room [laughing] at home where my wife has given up, she doesn’t set foot in here because it’s a terrible mess.¹⁸²” The conquest of this space by his “gadgets” was progressive: “It’s a room that normally was supposed to be a guest bedroom. Then progressively it became the office, then after that it became more of a workshop than an office [laughing].¹⁸³”

¹⁷⁹“Ah oui oui oui, écoute, j’ai eu au moins trois, trois, trois hommes, ah oui oui. Tu vois c’était, tu vois, ‘T’es belle, t’es comment, t’es machin.’ [...] ‘Tu penses à moi’, machin”

¹⁸⁰“C’est mon mari. C’est lui qui a toujours pris ça. Moi j’ai commencé beaucoup plus tard. [...] C’est lui qui s’en servait, les enfants s’en servait. Moi je, moi j’étais pas vraiment intéressée par ça.”

¹⁸¹“Donc en fait c’est dans mon grenier, j’ai, j’ai installé un siège de voiture, et là dedans j’ai mon ordinateur qui est à côté, et j’ai un manche à balai, j’ai des commandes au pied, ce qu’on appelle le palonnier, j’ai une manette de gaz, ça semble étonnant mais en fait elles sont d’un avion de chasse américain, ça existe toujours.”

¹⁸²“J’ai une pièce [rires] à la maison où ma femme a renoncé, elle y met pas les pieds parce que c’est un capharnaüm effrayant.”

¹⁸³“C’est une pièce qui normalement devait être la chambre d’ami. Puis petit à petit c’est devenu le bureau, puis après c’est devenu plus un atelier qu’un bureau [rires].”

Yet womanhood, as a social and cultural position, also strategic resources for video game play in old age. On one hand, the conjunction of norms related to femininity and successful aging facilitates older women's involvement in collective leisure activities and learning situations (Marhánková 2014). On the other hand, heavily feminized professions (such as teachers or secretaries) have familiarized certain groups of women with ITC and particularly computers (Delias 2019). Interviewees illustrate this pattern: many of the women have not only learned how to use a computer during their career but have also been introduced to video games in that context. Dominique started playing games on the computer she acquired for her home publishing business. Nicole was introduced to point'n'click games by her colleagues during breaks on the computers of the tax centre she worked at. Although her husband had bought a home computer years earlier, she had never used it. Jacqueline delved into video games after the IT manager of her workplace (a woman) installed games on her work computer. Bourdeloie and Boucher-Petrovic's (2013) study of computer classes for older adults highlights that age, gender, but also other factors such as socio-economic class have ambivalent implications for older adults' technology uses. There are significantly more women than men in the computer classes that the study describes, as is often the case in such initiatives (Lavenir 2022). The women who participate in these classes are aware and reflexive of the role of gender in their relationship with technology, and several mention that they want to learn about computers because they want to be more independent, particularly from the men (particularly the husbands and sons) in their lives. Bourdeloie and Boucher-Petrovic note that class nuances gendered experiences and that working-class men have significantly less opportunities to domesticate computers than middle-class women (particularly if they have a higher education degree and/or an office job).

Nonetheless, the prevalence of women among older adults who play video games reinforces the devaluation of older adults' play. In gaming culture, the value of different forms of play depends in part from the assumed identity of their players. For instance player communities that value the gamer identity tend to define casual practices as woman's play and vice versa (Anable 2013). As Vanderhoef (2013: n.p.) notes, "Together, sectors of commercial culture and core gaming culture work to position casual games as first feminine and then, tacitly if not vocally, as inferior and lacking when compared to masculinized hardcore video games." The gendered hierarchization of play practices (with women's play stigmatized as being too easy, too lazy, or not real play) extends beyond video games. There is a historical pattern to women's exclusion from culturally and politically celebrated forms of play, as women "were condemned to the presumed frivolity of their own lesser play forms." (Sutton-Smith 1997:87) The association of women with depreciated game genres and play styles further marginalizes them, a process that has repercussions for older adults' play as a whole.

Such hierarchizations and categorizations of video game play have not gone unnoticed by older players. When Christine reflects on the people she knows who play video games, she correlates the dichotomy between casual and hardcore play with a gendered opposition:

Ah, so I haven't, well, so the games I have, *Candy Crush*, *Pokémon Go*, I don't even know if it still exists, that thing. Um, what do they play, *Gummy Drop*, too. Here. It's, it's mostly women. [...] I don't know any men [who play]. Yes, I do know one, the son of a friend, but he's really a gamer, see. He can spend entire nights, um, playing online, see. [...] yes, he's really addicted, but really. But I believe, he even does tournaments, well he earns money with that.¹⁸⁴

Older adults who play video games often share gamer culture's disdain for the games they play: they describe them as "relatively dumb [...] not a great, um, cultural level", or "a little stupid, but it's fun", or "a little thing [that] isn't all that great". At the same time, older players also express suspicion and even disapprobation towards hardcore forms of play which they associate with dangerous or addictive practices. Stuck between the moral panics of the 1990s and the gatekeeping tendencies of gamer culture, older adults who play video games find it difficult to unreservedly appreciate their play.

Old age, womanhood, and a preference for casual play reinforce each other as markers of a devalued video game practice in old age. Each of these three characteristics is associated with representations of technological incompetency and disdain for video games as well as a lack of legitimacy within video game culture. In Khalili-Mahani *et al.*'s (2020:234) study, one of the young game designers who takes part in the video game workshops for older adults explicitly compares older adults' exclusion from gaming spaces to women's marginalization in gaming culture: "My experiences as a girl who plays video games cross over with the experiences of these seniors in many ways." The combination of old age, womanhood, and casual play crystallizes the marginality of older players in the spaces and communities dedicated to video games.

This calls into question the role of video games as identity resources in old age. Most older players express no interest in becoming gamers (or silver gamers). Both roles are difficult to perform for older adults who do not fit the expectations of either hardcore gaming or successful aging. Both are also relatively unappealing to older adults who are wary of the intensive and demanding practice that is expected of gamers and who do not want to be constantly reminded of their age. Yet video game play does provide older adults with valuable identity resources insofar as it constitutes an opportunity to rearrange and reinforce their performance of a certain identity (which is not necessarily related to video games). Philippe plays flight simulators as an extension of his passion for planes, particularly when the weather or circumstances prevent him from actually flying. Video games are a logical continuation of Alain's fondness for computers and digital technology. Yvette maintains her perception of herself as a literary person with word

¹⁸⁴“Ah, alors là j'ai pas, bon bah les jeux que j'ai, *Candy Crush*, *Pokémon Go*, je sais même pas si ça existe encore, ce truc. Euh, à quoi ils jouent, à *Gummy Drop*, aussi. Voilà. C'est des, c'est plutôt des femmes. [...] Je connais pas d'hommes. Si, je connais le fils d'une amie, mais lui c'est vraiment un gamer quoi. Lui il peut passer des nuits entières, euh, à jouer en ligne, quoi. [...] Oui, il est vraiment accro, mais complètement. Mais je crois, il fait même des tournois, enfin il gagne de l'argent avec ça.”

games and puzzles. It appears that the gamer figure is not the be-all and end-all of what video games bring to their players in terms of social status and identity.

5.3. Patterns Of Digital Play In Old Age

Older adults engage with video games in a distinctive way. Play practices and game preferences are homogeneous within the age group, different from other age groups of video game players, and marginalized among gaming cultures. Additionally, there are recurring patterns in older adults' trajectories, stories, and experiences of video game play. The previous chapters have identified several of these patterns and retraced them to the social and cultural circumstances of old age. This section lists these elements in order to characterize older adults' play and sustain the argument that the circumstances of old age shape digital play in diverse and significant ways.

Standardized Play In Old Age?

The claim that older adults have a distinctive experience of video game play is not an easy one to make. Critical studies of aging have called attention to the ethical, political, and methodological shortcomings of essentializing and deterministic statements that lump all individuals over sixty together, often under derogatory representations. Furthermore, social scientists have historically participated in the constitution of homogenizing categories that facilitate the administration of social groups (*cf.* Chapter 2.2). Older adults are among these groups that have been denied agency and expertise, particularly in medical and gerontological research. Therefore, arguments about the uniqueness of older adults' experiences call for nuance and caution.

I did not start my research on older adults and video games with the hypothesis that their play was in any way specific or typical of their age group. On the contrary, I began my fieldwork with the expectation that older adults were no different from other players and that old age only marginally mattered in video game play. I was intent on criticizing assumptions that depicted old age as an experience that made individuals essentially different and Other. I wanted to show that older players were ordinary players¹⁸⁵. I assumed that the data from observations and interviews would disprove the notion that older adults have a distinct and age-specific relationship with video games. However, that is not what the data suggested, either in surveys or ethnographic and qualitative research. Older adults' video game play is not stereotypical and predictable, nor does it conform to the image put forward by the silver gamer discourse; but it does present specific patterns that reflect the circumstances of old age.

The contextual specificity of older adults' play evokes Schott and Horrell's (2000) observation that women have specific video game play practices that stem from gendered power relations and the association of video games with masculinity. Rather than an autonomous culture of play, women who play video games adopt practices that attempt to compensate for the effects of their

¹⁸⁵In this regard, I came to realize that the notion of "ordinary players" is of limited value: video games players are distributed into various groups and practice communities ("*communautés de pratiques*"), and the "ordinary" or average player is a statistical artifact that is quite difficult to find in the field.

marginalization: they watch others play, choose games that are coded as masculine, or avoid video game-centred places of socialization. Thornham (2011:56) identifies a similar dynamic in the mixed households where she conducts her ethnography of video games: women “work[] to negotiate a space from which female gamers can speak without being immediately dismissed or ridiculed.” Thornham provides numerous illustrations of women’s careful management of their play, including informant Sara’s assessment of her play before and after she moved out of a flat she shared with male housemates:

I wouldn’t take it very seriously. I’d clown about and mess about and pretend I couldn’t work out what to do. And I didn’t bother to try to improve as a gamer because that was my role. Whereas now I’m gaming and I’m looking at the map to try and see where the symbol is and where I’m going. There, they would just be amused that I was so rubbish. They’d always be telling me what to do. But that’s boys isn’t it? (p. 58).

Therefore, in a way distinct from but similar to gender, old age matters in digital play.

My analysis does not aim to replace one determinism (biological) with another (social). It draws on a sociological perspective that highlights structural constraints as well as individual agency and pays close attention to their interaction. Old age does not dictate the way individuals engage with video games. Older adults have long biographies and intersecting identities that shape their engagement with leisure and technology as much as old age does. They are also creative users of technology who adapt devices, games, and play styles to fit their preferences and resources. Older adults’ video game play is diverse within the material and social constraints that create patterns and commonalities. These characteristics are not present in every older player’s practice. Still, there are patterns and commonalities in older adults’ play, which tends to be solitary, stable, discreet, and self-aware.

Solo Play

After an initial period of discovery and learning with the help of relatives and friends, older adults generally play on their own. There are exceptions to that pattern, such as Sylvie, who plays with her guild-mates on an online multiplayer game, or *Golden-Age Games* participants, who by definition play in a collective setting. But solo play is a fixture of video game play in old age, both in the sense that older players tend to be alone in front of their device (with no one to play with them or watch them play) and that they engage in games that require no other participant. The literature on older adults and video games confirms the prevalence of solo play among older adults. In Kaufman *et al.*’s (2016) study of players over 55 years old, 81,7% play on their own.

The situation is more complex for *Golden-Age Games* participants. Institutional play is shaped by the material constraints and emphasis on socialization that the silver gamer discourse promotes. The workshops are built around collective and competitive play in *Wii Sports*

Bowling. Participants have to share the few devices (one console and a few tablets) that organizers set up during the workshops. This gives rise to a play style that combines solo and collaborative play while accounting for participants' varying levels of skill and comfort with technology. In tablet games, there are often two or more participants, and sometimes a volunteer, who play together:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Two participants are playing a game of hangman on the tablet. They take turns proposing letters, and one of the participants taps on the screen to input the letter. They don't speak and just say "Your turn" when they're done.

Participants play together without having to engage in competition, and those who are not comfortable with digital technology can avoid direct interaction with the machine. This form of play, which is solitary from the perspective of the machine (who registers one player), stands at the intersection of solo and collective play.

Institutional play aside, older adults tend to play on their own (*cf.* Chapter 4.4.). Although Martine is unsatisfied with her isolation and actively works towards engaging with other players, most interviewees express satisfaction with this situation. But older adults' tendency to play on their own is not only a matter of choice or individual preference. The prevalence of solo play echoes the reduction in sociability that characterizes old age as a stage of the life course. Over the course of adulthood, the social network of individuals tends to narrow and re-centre on (emotionally and/or geographically) close relationships including friends, neighbours, and particularly relatives (Blanpain and Pan Ké Schon 1998). This process reaches a peak in old age when the family becomes central in older adults' social networks, particularly after eighty years old. This reconfiguration is closely connected to the institutionalization of the life course that assigns individuals to specific spaces of socialization depending on the age category to which they belong (Kohli 1988; Bidart 2010). The phenomenon particularly affects childhood and old age to whom specific institutions (respectively schools and care homes) are dedicated. It is more intense for children, who are legally obligated to attend school, while the proportion of older adults who reside in care homes is relatively low, with 10% of individuals over 75 years old living in *EHPAD* and *résidences-autonomie* in 2015 (Muller 2017). Still, the existence of both young children and older adults in public spaces is problematized (either as a nuisance for others or a risk for them) and specific spaces are dedicated to them (such as playgrounds for children and senior centres for older adults). Older adults' exclusion from the labour market compounds this situation and further constrains their social participation. Additionally, the social spaces that are dedicated to video games (such as online communities or players and video game conventions) are not welcoming to older adults who do not fit the figure of the (young, male, able-bodied) gamer. Some manage to enter into gaming spaces and communities, like Sylvie, but it remains a difficult endeavour.

As a result, older adults are pushed towards specific forms of video game play. On one hand, this situation encourages solo play and orients older players towards games that do not require

a partner. On the other hand, it deprives them of a system of social support and guidance, thus limiting their ability to overcome in-game difficulties and explore new genres and styles. In contrast with children and teenagers who often start playing video games alongside their peers, older players cannot draw on the resources of a social network of fellow players or more experienced relatives. This points to a broader sense of isolation regarding technology and its uses. When a device proves unpredictable or stubborn, older adults have to either ask younger relatives for help (who are often reluctant to become on-call tech support staff), explore the Internet and technical documentation for a solution (a strategy that requires pre-existing skills and familiarity with web browsing), or give up. The political preoccupations with digital illiteracy have led to the establishment of public institutions dedicated to technical support such as the EPN (“*Espaces Publics Numériques*”). But such spaces are relatively rare and not well-known by the general public. In this context, older adults take advantage of every opportunity to get help with their devices. Several *Golden-Age Games* workshops are turned into hotlines and tech support platforms by one or several participants who face problems or are frustrated by the difficult access to tech-related information. A participant exclaims: in electronics stores, “They don’t give a shit, they sell, and after that, pfft!”

Committed Play

Older players tend to be very committed to a handful of games, if not one single game. Their play is often very stable, in the sense that older players often play one game for an extended period (rather than playing several games at once and/or trying out new games regularly). This stems in part from their isolation from gaming spaces and communities, which both steadies and weakens their play by limiting their access to video game-related knowledge and information. Because they do not socialize with other players and are nearly absent from video game-centred spaces, older adults are not exposed to new releases and, more generally, are not necessarily aware of the variety of available games. Several *Golden-Age Games* coordinators identify this as a challenge for the workshops:

[field notes from a conversation with a local coordinator] The coordinator tells me that volunteers struggle to think of new games to set up in the workshops. I ask what participants ask for, and the coordinator tells me that “the elderly can’t ask for what they don’t know”, so it’s up to volunteers to ask the right questions to identify games that participants might like.

This assertion deserves some nuance: a significant proportion of participants have some notion of what video games look like and what kind of games exist, if only thanks to 1990s news stories and (for those equipped with a smartphone) the front page of the app store. Still, older players tend to be disconnected from the spaces and networks where video game-related news or word-of-mouth recommendations are present. As a result, older adults are less likely to try out new games, explore new genres, or switch to a new device.

Happy accidents happen, but in practice, nearly all the games that interviewees play (or have played) have been introduced to them by others. Sylvie started playing *World of Warcraft* at her son's suggestion and Nathalie started playing *Scrabble* on her phone in 2015 because her children encouraged her to try it. Dominique and Bernard played their first video game, *Mario Bros.*, with Bernard's daughter and son-in-law, and Yvette's daughter gave her a tablet on which she had installed a sudoku game. Philippe got into flight simulators because of an insistent friend and colleague, and Nicole started playing point'n'click games with her coworkers on her workplace computer. Chantal downloaded her first game to join her friends on *Ruzzle*, Jacqueline had a neighbour show her and then download *Tetris* for her, and Alain discovered video games through fellow students when he was studying computer science.

Older adults tend to focus on a very limited number of games for a long time. The pattern is documented in the literature on older adults and video games. De Schutter (2011) notes that 58,1% of his respondents have purchased no game over the past year. Beyond matters of preference, this endangers older adults' play. If a game becomes too uninteresting or difficult, players struggle to replace it and may interrupt their play for a while. This pattern is not exclusive to older players and concerns all players who have limited access to video game sociabilities. But it heavily weighs on older adults whose position in the life course create cumulative difficulties. When interviewees faced difficulties in their play ten or fifteen years ago, they could find other people to help them more easily than today. Their workplace sustained their play, as was the case for Nicole whose colleagues regularly tested new point'n'click games on the tax centre's computers, or Jacqueline whose IT manager installed games on her work computer at her request. In contrast, their play in old age is more stable. Older players are aware of the distinctive stability of their play, particularly in contrast with younger players. As Sylvie notes about her son: "And, well, and like many young people he switched games. Young people, they are constantly playing new games¹⁸⁶."

Older players do not passively endure the limitations put upon their play by these circumstances. Jacqueline, who has mostly played classic puzzles and board games as well as word games (including for instance *Tetris*, mah-jong, and *Croque-Mot*), has plans: "I'm starting, in fact, after twenty years, to get a little bored with these games. I think I'll look around a bit.¹⁸⁷" Yvette took steps to find and contact someone who could help her to get a crossword game on her tablet, although with limited success. Jacqueline has found and downloaded new games on her phone: "I looked around, I must've done one or two little games like this, bubble games, because I get bored on the train, but.¹⁸⁸" The discovery of a new device sometimes inspires older players to try and branch out from their usual genres, as in the case of Isabelle who started looking for new games when she bought a new smartphone and had to reinstall everything anyway. Older players occasionally turn to acquaintances or electronics store salespeople, like Jacqueline who learned how to use her computer with the help of her Internet provider's hotline

¹⁸⁶“Et puis, et puis comme beaucoup de jeunes il a changé de jeu. Ils changent tout le temps de jeu, les jeunes.”

¹⁸⁷“Je commence d'ailleurs au bout de vingt ans à m'ennuyer un peu avec ces jeux. Je pense que je vais chercher un peu.”

¹⁸⁸“J'ai cherché, j'ai dû faire un ou deux petits jeux comme ça, de bulles, parce que je m'ennuie dans le train, mais.”

(back in the 2000s): “Operators, I was all alone, and I called operators and said here. But the operators. Very nice.¹⁸⁹” Older players who are comfortable with Web browsing make extensive use of online resources. Sylvie describes the painstaking process of learning that she had to power through in order to become a better *World of Warcraft* player:

When you start a game that you don’t know, you discover everything by yourself. When you’re really stuck, you can always check on the Internet, on YouTube particularly, to check “Let’s play’s”¹⁹⁰. Or on websites where they explain, where all the solutions are explained. So in the beginning, you know nothing. You start and you know nothing. You have to manage on your own [laughing].¹⁹¹

It takes time as well as knowledge (of one’s tastes, of the games and genres that exist, of the technical possibilities offered by one’s device) to find new games successfully and consistently. The difficulty in obtaining new games is a source of frustration for older players. When a game becomes boring or too difficult, they may still feel like they are stuck with it because they do not know what else they would like, where to look for it, or how to procure it. The very notion of downloading a game can be strange and even anxiety-inducing for technology users who have been bombarded with messages about the dangers of the Internet since the 1990s. Many interviewees recount their attempts, and failures, to find new games. After seeing a friend of hers play crosswords on her tablet, Yvette wanted to try it, but could not figure out how to install a new game or find someone willing to help her: “The only thing I can really do on it, it’s sudoku, that’s it.”¹⁹²

Discreet Play

Older adults’ video game play oscillates between a high degree of visibility, prompted by media interest in the silver gamer narrative and its quaint protagonists, and an attempt at discretion, as players struggle with the many meanings associated with their play. The incongruity of adult play weighs on their engagement with video games. If play is for children, idleness is inappropriate in a work society, and video games carry the threat of addiction and violence, then older adults have no business playing video games. An additional complication comes from the suspicion of cognitive decline that surrounds older adults who engage in behaviours interpreted as childlike. In this context, older adults who play video games have a strong incentive to hide or disguise their practice. Quandt *et al.* (2009) document the disapproval that older adults who play video games face, particularly from their friends and acquaintances of

¹⁸⁹“Les opérateurs, j’étais toute seule et je téléphonais aux opérateurs en disant voilà. Mais les opérateurs. Très sympa. [...] Je pense qu’il n’y avait pas encore trop de personnes qui étaient sur leur dos à cette époque.”

¹⁹⁰In “Let’s Play” videos, a player films themselves playing a game, often with commentary and advice on the best way to play.

¹⁹¹“Quand tu commences un jeu que tu connais pas, tu découvres tout par toi-même. Quand t’es vraiment bloquée, t’as toujours la possibilité d’aller sur Internet, sur Youtube en particulier, voir les démos. Ou sur des sites où on t’explique, où toutes les solutions sont expliquées. Donc au début tu sais rien. Tu démarres et tu sais rien. Faut que tu te démerdes [rires].”

¹⁹²“La seule chose que je peux vraiment faire dessus, c’est le sudoku, c’est tout.”

the same age and from their partners who resent games for taking up too much of their time. De Schutter *et al.* (2014) recount that one respondent had taken to hiding her GameBoy when she expected people to come over because of criticisms she had received from visitors in the past. Most interviewees do not talk about their play with others and emphasize the solitary and intimate nature of the practice.

The relative invisibility of older adults' play is exacerbated by gaming communities' and game companies' indifference toward them. The video game industry rarely ever addresses older adults as players, with the notable exception of Nintendo's ad campaign for the Wii console. This contributes to limiting older adults' access to information about video games, as Khalili-Mahani *et al.*'s (2020) study concludes. The authors have set up workshops during which older adults learn how to play various games and talk about digital play with young researchers and game designers. Respondents' interest in video games is limited by their lack of knowledge about what kind of games exist: when asked what they would like to play, they cannot offer any suggestions, and end up discovering entire genres during the workshops. George, who is 92 years old, starts out by stating that he dislikes digital play, but learns about the existence of word puzzles and games during the project and ends up buying a tablet on which he downloads spelling games. One of the game designers who participates in the study realizes that

Although the participants greatly enjoyed trying the games that we shared, they had mostly not heard of them at all prior to this intervention. What this means to me as a game designer is that many groups of people, particularly our seniors, continue to be alienated from our play experiences that are mostly marketed online. (p. 235)

In summary, “[c]ultural accessibility is more important than mechanical accessibility”, “not only in game design, but also in game marketing and dissemination” (p. 235).

The emergence of a discourse that celebrates video game play for older adults paradoxically complicates their engagement with the practice. The silver gamer figure values a specific performance that revolves around exergaming and cognitive training, intergenerational play, and digital literacy. It sets norms and expectations about the proper way to play in old age. Consequently, older players have to either justify or dissimulate the discrepancy between silver gamer play and their practice. The exercise is all the trickier that older players occasionally draw on the silver gamer discourse to counter criticisms about their play, as part of their efforts to find alibis for play in adulthood (Deterding 2018). Nonetheless, older adults tend to hide their practice rather than flaunt it. But the management of their play's visibility is complex and context-dependent.

Self-Aware Players

Older adults' relationship with video games is further complicated by assumptions about their lack of skill. Representations of older adults as clueless tech users and incompetent video game

players are pervasive, whether in gamer communities or among some of the actors who promote video games for older adults, and even among older players themselves. This notion contributes to unsettling older adults' play, fuelling a sense of embarrassment and self-consciousness among older players.

Older adults engage with video games in a discursive context that calls their competence into question. Actors involved in the promotion of the silver gamer discourse, such as researchers or social workers, take it for granted that older players are not (and perhaps cannot be) good at what they do. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, this is visible in the discrepancy between volunteers' and participants' reactions to participants' performance, particularly in the assessment of what constitutes a good throw. Volunteers give positive feedback to nearly every throw and consider it a success as long as participants managed to down a few pins. Participants tend to take the game more seriously, wanting to win, and are annoyed or frustrated unless they manage a strike or a spare. In a workshop, a participant hits eight out of ten pins. The two volunteers clap and congratulate him. He protests: "I missed two pins!" In another workshop, a participant misses the pins and exclaims "Ah, fuck!"; the leisure coordinator laughs and says "Well, someone's not happy!" Overall, participants take the game more seriously than organizers, who do not expect much from them in terms of skill and focus on participants' behaving like "good sports" rather than invested players:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A member of the *EHPAD* staff walks by the workshop and watches participants play *Wii Bowling* for a minute. She jokingly says: "I see it's serious business!" The participant tells her (half-jokingly): "You're breaking our concentration!", "You're throwing us off course". The staff member tells her (with the same tone) that's she's being a sore loser.

Discussions between participants also disconcert organizers, who expect and aim for a peaceful and good-natured atmosphere in the workshops. Yet participants are not shy when it comes to acknowledging that a throw was bad, criticizing each other's technique, or express annoyance when someone is holding up the game. This creates tensions between participants and organizers. During a game, a participant comments on another's throw (which only hit a couple of pins): "Well, that's not good", and the volunteer immediately corrects her: "Don't say stuff like that!" When participants are frustrated about their loss, organizers dismiss it as jealousy, "being a bad sport", or age-related emotional instability. There are exceptions: in some workshops, participants are not very invested in the game, and in others, volunteers are intent on properly training "their" participants. But as a general rule, organizers and participants have different understandings of the meaning attached to competition in older adults' video game play.

Similarly, whenever journalists report on an older player who plays "hardcore" games or gets good scores, the tone is one of over-the-top amazement that signals the exceptionalism of an older adult who plays well. This belief draws on representations of older adults as incompetent and disgruntled technology users, compounded by the association of digital technology and

youth exemplified by the figure of the digital native. Such a belief is impossible to prove or disprove insofar as a quantitative, comparative study of video game skills by age group (relying on one or several indicators for competency across all game genres and platforms) could not possibly be conducted. Still, as reported in the literature and observed during my fieldwork, older adults who play video games have varying levels of skills that seem to depend for the most part on factors other than age. Concretely, in *Golden-Age Games* workshops, age or disability did not predict an individual's performance at *Wii Sports Bowling* and volunteers did not systematically win when they played against participants. Yet assumptions about older players' low proficiency are pervasive.

Older adults do sometimes find it extremely difficult to play. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants occasionally struggle so much that volunteers have to explain and demonstrate the controller's use dozens of times over the course of an hour and a half. A common difficulty concerns the Wiimote controller. To throw the ball, players stand in front of the sensor, make an upward gesture that starts near their knee, and release one of the controller's two buttons in the middle of their swing. Players tend to let go of the button too late or too early, a miscalculation that results in the ball not being thrown. When a player fails to throw the ball several times in a row, a pop-up appears on the screen with a reminder on the proper way to throw the ball. This frequently happens to participants, whatever their age or health status, during workshops as well as competitions, and it also happens to volunteers when they play. While the issue remains occasional in many workshops, it is frequent enough that it significantly disrupts others. In all cases, it is a source of embarrassment and stress for the people involved:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] Several participants in a row struggle with letting go of the button. The volunteer explains the proper gesture several times, insisting on the right moment to let go of the button. He apologizes: "I'm saying the same thing over and over again, I know it's a nuisance". He tries to reframe the situation positively: "When you get really annoyed, it can become a weapon, your throws become deadly." A participant chimes in and tells the struggling participant: "Why on Earth are you letting go now? You're not supposed to let it go [now]." The pop-up comes up on the screen: participants sigh.

Participants and organizers tense up when someone fails their throw, and the relief is palpable when the throw finally goes through. Sometimes, participants panic and frantically try to throw, leading to a series of failures and the appearance of the dreaded pop-up through which the machine shames the player for their inadequacy. When the tension becomes too much to bear, volunteers or employees take the controller from the participant's hand and throw the ball in their stead.

Older players' occasionally suboptimal techniques and lousy scores are the product of a specific context. The difficulties that older adults encounter when they play video games can be traced to several factors other than biological decline. A decisive element is older adults' access to the

playing device, a prerequisite for the comfortable domestication of the technology and practice. In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, the groups that seemed to struggle the most and score the lowest on *Wii Sports Bowling* were beginners and players with limited access to the device, for instance because the workshops happened less often in their institution or because there were large numbers of participants who played on the same machine. In some workshops, participants could only play three turns, so six throws, over the course of an hour and a half, with a half-hour between each throw. Accessibility in games adds another barrier to older adults' practice. Aging is sometimes associated with bodily changes that video games do not accommodate: some participants mentioned having arthritis, a sore arm, or bad eyesight, which directly affected their play. A volunteer mentions that a visually impaired participant had to go up to the screen to see which pins are still standing, then walk back to her chair and try to remember where she should direct her throw. This is a typical instance of *bricolage* and adaptation, but also an illustration that older adults' play faces impediments that are not conducive to great scores or rapid progress.

Furthermore, older adults' video game play is often beginner's play, which comes with its own set of difficulties and marginalization. Interrogating "why someone would choose not to play video games", Juul (2010:5) highlights that first experiences with (particularly "hardcore") video games are all about

the frustration of not knowing which buttons to push, of being unfamiliar with the conventions on the screen, of being reluctant to invest hours, days, and weeks into playing this game, of being indifferent to the fiction of the game, of having a stupid machine tell you that you have failed, of being unable to fit a game into your life.

Playing skills are not a direct result of age, as young players' sometimes poor performance in *Golden-Age Games* matches illustrate. As Ter Minassian *et al.* (2021) note, many if not most players are not actually very good at the games they play, and their involvement or their enjoyment of the practice is not directly correlated to their mastery of the game.

The theme of older players' lack of self-esteem runs throughout the literature and the fieldwork, particularly in *Golden-Age Games* workshops. McLaughlin *et al.* (2012:17) remark that "[s]tarting to play a new game with beliefs such as these [incompetence] may handicap older players more than might actual age-related decrements in ability." In Wollersheim *et al.*'s (2010:89) study, the researchers had to reassure and encourage older participants to convince them to play and continue to play, as "their lack of familiarity with the technology caused them to make many mistakes, which made them feel embarrassed and led to self criticism." During *Golden-Age Games* workshops, participants often comment on others' and their own performance and do not hold back on the criticism, particularly when it comes to themselves. A participant who finds her final score too low dejectedly says to herself: "Go on then, you'd better go to bed, girl." Another remarks to a fellow participant: "Throw harder. That said, I wouldn't have done any better myself." Older players are quick to blame themselves when they

encounter difficulties, while younger players regularly shift the blame on ill-designed games or faulty machines:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre) Three people are playing *Wii Bowling*: two participants in their seventies and the granddaughter of another participant (who is doing something on her tablet with the help of a volunteer). [...] The participant misses and throws a gutter ball. She says: “It’s a game for beginners, no doubt about that!” and makes it clear it’s her fault. It’s the teenager’s turn. She fails to let go of the button in time and misses her throw entirely. She is annoyed at the game and the controller’s design: “It’s so difficult!”

Participants regularly deflect compliments on their performance by answering that they didn’t actually try to do that, or they have no idea how they managed this one. Bernard frames himself as the quintessential incompetent older player:

The last game that Fabien had built with his students, we were unable to play it. And I had recorded a little [video], my screen, to send it to him, and he said, “That’s great, if you don’t mind, I will show that to my students to have a laugh.” I’m completely incompetent. It’s too quick, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and very very quickly it annoys me.¹⁹³

Older adults’ perception of their play is however complex. While they are quick to blame themselves when they encounter difficulties, older players have varying relationships with challenge in video games. They sometimes use their assumed lack of skill as an excuse to escape an organizer’s insistence that they participate in a workshop. They can also claim that they are bad players in order to free themselves from the judgment of others. But older players also express pride and satisfaction in their performance, either in comparison with other older players (like Sylvie who describes herself as “good for her age”) or in general. Older adults who play video games, joined in this by actors who promote the silver gamer discourse, tend to value progress over performance: what matters is not being good at a game but constantly becoming better. This echoes the successful aging discourse’s emphasis on self-work and “becoming the best version of oneself”. The preoccupation with progress concerns interviewees with very different genres and play styles. Marie passionately comments on her performance in the word game *Jardin des mots*: “I don’t give a shit, I don’t care about leveling up, I don’t. What I want to do is succeed at something. [...] It’s about progressing, getting ahead, progressing, giving yourself a goal, um, yes.¹⁹⁴”. Sylvie has a similar outlook on her *World of Warcraft* play:

¹⁹³“Le dernier jeu que Fabien avait fabriqué avec ses étudiants, on était incapable d’y jouer. Et j’avais pris une petite [séquence], mon écran, pour le lui envoyer, et il a dit ‘C’est bien, tu permets, je vais montrer ça à mes étudiants pour les faire rire.’ Je suis totalement incompetent. Ça va trop vite, je sais pas ce qu’il faut faire, et puis très très vite ça m’énervé.”

¹⁹⁴“Je m’en fous, fiche de monter de niveau, moi. Ce que je veux c’est réussir à quelque chose. [...] C’est de progresser, d’avancer, de progresser, de se donner un objectif, euh, voilà.”

“because, if you play this game, it’s to face some, some, some, uh, situations that are more and more complicated, and then evolve, evolve, progress, all the time, all the time, all the time.”¹⁹⁵”

Selective Play

Older adults manage the complex representations and meanings associated with video games, including their reputation of violence and addiction. In practice, all video game players (whatever their age) have to justify their play in response to anxieties about the dangers of video games (Gerber, 2015). But the assignment is particularly challenging for older adults who have to simultaneously navigate devalued images of old age and anxieties about video games. To create a position that they can comfortably inhabit as video game players, older adults establish hierarchies of games and play styles. Older adults make strategic distinctions that let them frame their own play as acceptable and fundamentally different from others’ potentially deviant play.

Firstly, older players hierarchize video games according to their perceived level of violence. The moral panics of the 1990s remain influential in older adults’ rapport with video games. Alain mentions *Carmaggedon*, which was at the heart of a media controversy in the late 1990s: “There’s also the game where you drive around town and you get points when you drive over people. It’s really horrible [laughing].”¹⁹⁶” The concept of violent games is relatively blurry and refers to different aspects: it encompasses games with gory graphics, combat mechanisms, or war-related themes. Martine stringently denounces *Fortnight*, which she accuses of “destroying” young players, citing a psychologist friend of hers. Beyond *Fortnight*, “really, in general, I’m not okay with war games.”¹⁹⁷” To contextualize, *Fortnight* is a third-person shooter that includes a battle royale mode (where players are pitched against each other). *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, Martine’s favourite game, is a single-player adventure game whose story-line involves a lot of monster-killing. In both cases, the game’s core mechanism involves the player picking up a weapon and repeatedly beating adversaries to death. This comparison suggests that the line between violent and non-violent games is circumstantial and quite blurry.

The category of violent games plays a role that is first and foremost rhetorical. It lets older players distinguish between their play and Others’ play, distancing themselves from a deplorable form of video game play that by contrast legitimizes their own. In De Schutter *et al.*’s (2014) study on the domestication of video games by older adults, respondents create similar distinctions in order to counter the notion that video games are an inappropriate activity for (older) adults. Respondent Guido explains:

But then again, I do not play those games the teens play. Never. I’m not interested. I only play games that require a brain to play. I’ve seen them, though. My son played one,

¹⁹⁵“Parce que, si on joue à ça, c’est pour affronter des, des, des, euh, des situations de plus en plus difficiles, et puis évoluer, progresser, tout le temps, tout le temps, tout le temps.”

¹⁹⁶“Il y a aussi le jeu où vous vous baladez en ville et vous marquez des points quand vous écrasez des gens. C’est une vraie horreur [rires].”

¹⁹⁷“D’ailleurs en général avec les jeux de guerre moi je suis pas d’accord.”

and that game was only about murdering people in a regular city environment... And warfare games as well. I am not convinced that you can learn anything worthwhile from those games. (p. 10)

Secondly, older adults categorize video games according to their imagined potential for addiction. The risk of becoming addicted preoccupies older players and sometimes prompts them to stop playing. Philippe, like many interviewees, is more worried about addiction than violence in video games:

On the Internet, you always see the ads, the last game that came out, etc. etc., with machine guns or with. Well, it leaves me cold. [*What are your opinions on this?*] Oh well. I don't think anything about it, everyone finds their fun where they can. Still one must be careful, see, one must be careful about the virtual world. It depends on how much time you spend on it.¹⁹⁸

Older adults often associate violence and addiction to video games with young players. Interviewees oppose their play with young adults' play in order to frame their practice as responsible and moderate. This lets older players both agree with the notion that video games are dangerous while shifting the criticism onto others' play and portraying their own play as quintessentially different and reasonable. The contrast between two age groups and/or two generations comes up several times in interviewees' accounts. Philippe (who himself never married or had children) muses:

I'm from a generation, a generation, where games. People who are married, who have kids, etcetera. They got to 45 years old at the beginning of IT, when IT got into the home, well. They had other things to do than getting all into games, really.¹⁹⁹

Chantal is perplexed by her adult son's relationship with video games:

No but he could, even when his friends come to see him and all, he can spend, or even his brother, um, before he became a dad, he spent the night. [...] Ah yes, no I'm stunned that at thirty years old you could still [laughing] but well obviously it's a generation thing.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸“Sur Internet on voit toujours les pubs, le dernier jeu qui est sorti, *etcetera ectetera*, à coup de mitraillettes ou à coup de. Bon, ça m'a laissé froid. [Qu'est-ce que vous en pensez ?] Oh bah. J'en pense rien, chacun prend son plaisir comme il peut. Après il faut faire gaffe, quoi, il faut faire gaffe au monde virtuel. Ça dépend combien de temps on passe dessus.”

¹⁹⁹“Moi je suis d'une génération, une génération, où les jeux. Les gens qui sont mariés, qui ont des gamins, *etcetera*. Ils arrivaient à 45 ans au début de l'informatique quand l'informatique arrivait à la maison, bon, ils avaient autre chose à faire que d'avoir leur nez dans les jeux, quoi.”

²⁰⁰“Non mais il est capable y compris quand ses potes viennent le voir et tout, il est capable d'y passer, ou même son frangin, euh, avant qu'il ne soit papa, qui passait la nuit. [...] Ah oui, non moi je suis effarée qu'à trente balais tu puisses encore [rires] mais bon visiblement si tu veux, c'est une question de génération.”

Alain also mentions his son as the polar opposite of his own play style: “We really don’t have the same tastes [laughing] because he’s more the, you know, how do you call these games where you kill each other.²⁰¹” For Alain, this opposition between young and old applies not only to the taste for violence but also to the risk of addiction:

Addiction to video games, I see young people, people I know, young, they’re, what, in their forties, single, and they’re addict to games, see. [...] I tell myself, it does quite surprise me, really. The guy comes back home from work, he’s going to spend three hours in front of his screen. On a, playing games, online, um. [...] It’s a social fracture in a way.²⁰²

In summary, older adults construct hierarchies of play that frame their practice as normal and responsible, in contrast to play that is deemed to be violent and excessive at the expense of other important social responsibilities.

²⁰¹“On n’a pas du tout les mêmes goûts [rires], parce que lui c’est plus les, vous savez, comment on appelle les jeux, où on s’entretue.”

²⁰²“L’addiction des jeux, moi je vois des jeunes, des gens que je fréquente, des jeunes, ils ont quoi, quarante ans, ils sont célibataires, et eux ils sont addicts aux jeux, quoi. [...] Là je me dis, ça me surprend pas mal, quoi. Le mec il va rentrer de son boulot, il passera trois heures devant son écran à. Sur un, à jouer sur des jeux de, en réseau quoi. [...] C’est une coupure sociale quelque part.”

Conclusion

Older adults' video game play features distinctive patterns and modes of engagement. Their specificity as a group is significant although not glaring. From a statistical point of view, older players resemble the general population of video game players insofar as they share the same preferences in terms of game genres (puzzles, digital versions of board or card games, word and number games) as well as practices associated with casual play (short play sessions, playing on a smartphone). Beyond this apparent similitude, however, older adults' play has one specificity: older adults are much less likely than other age groups to play games outside of the most common genres, to play with other people, to own a console, *etc.*

A close look at older adults' play practices retraces these characteristics back to the social and cultural context of old age. The prevalence of solo play and limited variety in games in older adults' play reflects their lack of access to gaming communities and the rarity of (visible) video game players within their social network. The conflicting meanings that surround old age and video games (as a youthful, dangerous, high-tech object) drive older adults to be discreet and self-aware about their play. Their long technobiography and introduction to video games in adulthood foregrounds certain games and devices, particularly those with connections to pre-existing practices (such as computer gaming or digital versions of board and card games).

These patterns shape older adults' play, but they do not constitute a deterministic or causal model.

The intersecting identities, long biographies, and Agency of individuals generate diverse experiences of old age. Older adults play video games in the context of old age with its limitations and possibilities. Therefore, they devise original and personal play styles, often by adapting their practices to the circumstances of aging as well as other factors such as their gender, and sometimes by pushing the boundaries established by these circumstances. While older players share the same predicament, they develop different practices in response to it, as shown by the diversity observed during *Golden-Age Games* workshops and recounted over interviews.

A striking illustration of play's unbounded potential in old age is the experience of gamers like Martine, Sylvie, or *Golden-Age Games* tournament winners. Despite older adults' (and particularly older women's) marginal position in gaming communities and cultures, these gamers engage in an intensive and dedicated play style that contrasts with the casual practice that is typical among older adults. Yet their practices reflect similar patterns of isolation, stability, and invisibility, as (old) age remains a structuring element in digital play.

CHAPTER 6. TIME TO PLAY

Video Games And The Management Of Everyday Life In Old Age

“[And when you retired, did you keep playing [video games]?] I was over the moon, to be able to play more. I was addicted. I’ve always loved playing. So yes, of course. [...] So not only did I keep on playing, but I even asked people to buy me a computer so I could play.”

Jacqueline

Toward the end of my interview with Jacqueline, she expressed surprise that I did not question her more about video games and time management. “How many hours? You didn’t ask that question!” I obliged and asked her how long and how frequently she played. She did not answer with an estimate but with a criticism of her practice: “Too much, my answer is, too much. At least three hours a day.” Jacqueline stopped there and looked at me expectantly. In response to my cheerful but noncommittal “Ah, okay”, she insists: “That’s a lot, isn’t it? No?²⁰³” Unable to deflect the question any longer, I tell her that this does not shock me. Jacqueline goes on to tell how much she loves playing video games, particularly at night when her husband is asleep, but circles back to her preoccupation with video games wasting her time and isolating her from her family several times during the last part of the interview.

Older adults’ video game play reflects a preoccupation with the value and management of time in old age. In this chapter, I examine how older adults fit video game play into their everyday life, paying attention to when, how often, for how long, and in what configuration they engage in digital play. For many players, video games are a mundane object, anchored in the day-to-day of ordinary life. As such, digital play has a critical role in the domestication of time in old age. This stage of the life course upsets the relationship to productive time, a structuring element imbued with normative meanings in contemporary capitalist ‘work societies’ (Kohli 1988). Because old age is symbolically and institutionally associated with the end of the working life, time management becomes a fraught matter for older adults. Whether they live at home or in aged care institutions, they navigate complex and sometimes contradictory expectations about the proper use of their time. Time and in particular leisure time become problematic while also materializing freedom from work. Therefore, time management plays a strategic role in the configuration of an uncomfortable identity of “old person”.

²⁰³“Combien d’heures ? Vous n’avez pas posé la question! [rires] [A votre avis, à quelle fréquence vous jouez et pendant combien de temps ?] Trop, ma réponse est trop. Au moins trois heures par jour. [Ah, d’accord.] C’est beaucoup, hein ? Non ?”

I argue that video game play provides older adults with opportunities to negotiate expectations and norms about time expenditure and the conduct of everyday life in old age. In this chapter, I consider themes such as leisure, sociability, or emotions through the prism of time: video games are an unobtrusive everyday companion, a well-deserved reward, a quick fix in times of over- or understimulation, a routine or ritual that structures the day, a medium for socialization, or a way to enjoy some alone time.

Video game play is conducive to older adults' efforts to reclaim their time and maintain control over it (6.1.), structure day-to-day life when aging disrupts their habits and frames of reference (6.2.) and maintain social interactions and relationships in changing circumstances (6.3.).

6.1. Video Games And Time Sovereignty

In old age, time holds various meanings and normative connotations. The (relative) absence of formal work in old age problematizes time as aimless idleness but it also fosters a sense of newfound freedom and control over one's life. Time sovereignty is paramount for older adults, who make strategic choices (particularly in terms of leisure) to stay in control of their time amidst calls to stay active and productive (Ekerdt and Koss 2016). This section considers how older adults' video game play fits into their appreciation for free time in old age, their efforts to manage expectations about staying active and productive, their complex rapport with the passage of time, and their preoccupation with maintaining control over their time.

“No One Will Force Me To Do Anything”: Relishing Free Time In Old Age

While old age is a challenging stage of the life course, older adults value it because it grants them a significant (and often unprecedented) amount of free time. Old age introduces an anomaly and a transgression into capitalist society insofar as it represents a period of life, sometimes a long one, in which the absence of work is normal (see Chapter 1.2). A majority of older adults report that they enjoy this aspect of retirement, at least in studies conducted in Western Europe (van Dyk *et al.* 2013). While the institution of retirement is challenged by neoliberal discourses and reforms, it remains an object of consensus among older adults themselves, including those who are not yet retired (Repetti 2015). The end of work and related obligations is a defining and prized feature of old age. For Nicole, the main change over the past ten years has been “[n]o more constraints, no more work constraints²⁰⁴”, and Nicole repeats several times over the course of the interview that now she has no obligations.

Older adults associate this stage of the life course with freedom, both in the sense of freedom from work and freedom to do as one likes. When asked about what has changed in their life over the past few years, interviewees who have recently stopped working often mention freedom. They particularly value the influx of free time in their life. Freedom is articulated in terms of control over one's time: it is about doing what they want, but most of all, it is about doing it when they want, as Chantal explains:

Ah yes, what changed, well that changed, so, I was retired and I could enjoy my time differently, in the sense that I could finally choose what I wanted to do every day and what I did not want to do.²⁰⁵

Philippe describes retirement as sudden independence: “Of course, you become independent overnight, in a sense, you do your own, you set up your own schedule.²⁰⁶” Martine concurs:

²⁰⁴“Plus de contrainte, plus de contrainte de travail”.

²⁰⁵“Ah si, ce qui a changé, enfin qui a changé, oui, j’ai donc été retraitée et j’ai pu jouir de mon temps différemment, c’est-à-dire que j’ai pu enfin choisir ce que j’avais envie de faire au quotidien et de ne pas faire.”

²⁰⁶“C’est sûr que tu deviens indépendant du jour au lendemain, tu fais un peu ta, tu fais ton propre programme.”

“I’m retired, I do things whenever I want, however I want, when I feel like it. I never put pressure on myself.²⁰⁷”

Older adults protect and value their free time, which they consider to be a legitimate compensation for a life of work. Although work and related constraints (particularly commutes) recede, older adults do not suddenly live a life devoid of obligations. Housework, grocery shopping, caring for younger or sick relatives, and various forms of work-adjacent leisure (including volunteering) still take up a significant amount of their time. Nonetheless, this stage of the life course provides opportunities to set time aside for oneself. Older adults seize retirement as an opportunity to reclaim their time and sanctuarize moments of their day or week, setting up moments when they “do nothing” and/or moments when they engage in activities that explicitly serve no purpose. One of the four types of time organizations that Petit (2012) identifies in retirees entirely revolves around this imperative to make time for oneself. The self-focused arrangement (“*agencement pour soi*”) is flexible, structured by a few formal activities (like an art class or a weekly visit at the farmer’s market), and centred on doing everything that was formerly impossible because of work- and family-related time constraints. Marie takes the time to do some self-care and pamper herself: in the morning, “first and foremost, I take care of myself.²⁰⁸” She puts on makeup and perfume as soon as she gets up. She defends this habit as something she does for herself because “there’s no one else to take care of me anymore²⁰⁹”. Jacqueline has taken up painting again when she retired: “Since I don’t intend to revolutionize modern painting, I paint for myself.²¹⁰” For Sylvie, it is gardening that constitutes both a time and a space dedicated solely to herself. Her video game practice is embedded in relationships and obligations toward others, particularly since she became her guild’s leader and took up all duties related to scheduling raids and coordinating guild members. In contrast, when she spends time in her garden, Sylvie has no one but herself and her happiness to take into consideration: “I feel, um. I really feel at home and free. Um. Where I finally, I get to recharge. Where no one will force me to do anything.²¹¹”

As leisure and free time become increasingly important in retirement, old age has the potential to rekindle interest in play. Several interviewees describe retirement as a time to finally indulge in play and particularly video game play. It is clearly the case for Martine, who identifies as a gamer and spends several hours a day playing *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Even interviewees who are much less invested in games (both as an identity and as a practice) share a similar sentiment. Jacqueline explains:

[*And when you retired, did you keep playing [video games]?*] I was over the moon, to be able to play more. I was addicted. I’ve always loved playing. So yes, of course. [...]

²⁰⁷“Je suis à la retraite, je fais les choses quand j’ai envie, comme j’ai envie, au moment où j’ai envie. je me mets jamais la pression.”

²⁰⁸“Premièrement, je m’occupe de moi.”

²⁰⁹“Il n’y a plus personne d’autre qui y pense”

²¹⁰“Comme j’ai pas l’intention de révolutionner la peinture moderne, je peins pour moi.”

²¹¹“Je me sens, euh. Je me sens vraiment chez moi et libre. Euh. Où j’ai enfin, je peux me ressourcer. Où personne va m’obliger à quoi que ce soit.”

So not only did I keep on playing, but I even asked people to buy me a computer so I could play. Not for emails. I hadn't started corresponding online then. So it was to play games, clearly.²¹²

Isabelle extends the reasoning beyond video games:

I would like to, I'd almost like to play more, a lot more. In fact, I was, if, um. If I had, I was going to say if I really were retired and I stopped, I'm thinking that I'd like to be in a bri[dge], in a *Scrabble* club, participate in competitions. Do something that's really, um, well. I'd like to, to play.²¹³

Brown (2014:89) identifies a similar phenomenon in her study of digital gaming among older adults:

There was greater emphasis on the importance of play during this stage of life, as it was regarded as an earned right that had been largely neglected since childhood. Participants reflected upon how they wish they could have played more during their younger and middle adulthood years but felt restricted due to family and career obligations.

Older women in particular express a certain frustration with the lack of free time and leisure in their adult life, which they attribute to work in a broad sense, including salaried work, domestic chores, and child-rearing. Old age becomes a time to return to play after a sometimes decade-long hiatus.

Between Indolence And Hustle: The Ambivalence Of Time In Retirement

The importance of free time in old age remains problematic in a society structured by work. Individuals have to manage the tension between opposite representations of old age as rest and busyness, a task in which leisure plays a strategic role. Old age in a work society transforms not only individuals' relationship to leisure (*cf.* Chapter 1.2.) but also their management of time and everyday life.

In a highly institutionalized life course, old age is associated with the institution of retirement, which marks a definitive exclusion from the world of formal work. Older adults' free time is an object of debate and even conflict. In that regard, the successful aging discourse is a valuable resource for retirees because of its emphasis on activity. Successful aging provides an

²¹²“[*Et quand vous êtes partie à la retraite est-ce que vous avez continué à jouer ?*] J'étais ravie, pour pouvoir jouer plus. J'étais accro. j'ai toujours aimé le jeu. Donc oui, bien sûr. [...] Donc non seulement j'ai continué à jouer mais j'avais demandé qu'on m'offre un ordinateur pour ça. Pas pour correspondre. Je n'avais pas encore pris en main la correspondance. Donc c'était pour jouer, c'est clair.”

²¹³“Moi j'aimerais bien que, j'aimerais presque plus jouer, beaucoup plus. A vrai dire, je m'étais si, euh. Si j'ai, j'allais dire j'étais vraiment en retraite et je m'arrêtais, je me dis que j'aimerais bien être dans un club de bri, de *Scrabble*, faire des compétitions. Faire quelque chose de vraiment, euh, voilà. Ça me plairait de, de jouer”.

alternative to the figure of the leisurely and idle pensioner which has become increasingly difficult to inhabit in the wake of neoliberal reforms and discourses. Repetti's (2015) study of Swiss retirees examines the attractiveness of the successful aging discourse to older adults on the lookout for moral justifications for their retirement. The model of the dynamic senior lets older adults embrace an identity centred on continued activity and social participation, a position that distances them from the figure of the retiree who drains the welfare state's resources.

Older adults engage in projects that allow them to perform the busy ethic, a perspective that values continued activity and prolongs the work ethic typical of contemporary societies in which labour (particularly formal employment) holds a structuring role (Ekerdt 1986). Older adults often engage (to varying degrees) in an ostensible display of activity. They accept and even seek additional, unpaid work that sometimes takes up a significant amount of their time. For instance, Isabelle and Michel took up demanding volunteering activities that correspond to a full-time job with responsibilities: both are tasked with mediating judicial conflicts and act as unpaid civil servants, one in the national education system and one in the economic sphere. Several interviewees purposefully went looking for "something to do" after they retired. Jacqueline recounts that "to keep busy, because nowadays there's no merit to that, to keep myself busy when I retired, I used to work nights at the homeless shelter [in the north of Paris]²¹⁴." In Chantal's case, the importance of remaining active and engaged in retirement is reinforced through interactions with others:

I have a girlfriend, Valérie, with whom I was talking, who lives in Bordeaux, with whom I was talking about this and that, um. And she was saying, she told me, "What are you going to do when you retire?". I told her "Look, I absolutely must find an association with cool ideas." And she tells me "Ah, I have an old friend who...", so I got in touch with the old friend who..., she told me "Ah well I'm looking for...", and that's how it worked out.²¹⁵

Older adults put forward narratives that frame them as perpetually busy with housework, leisure, care work, volunteering, and other forms of activity. These narratives are not actual accounts of their day but rather performances that manifest their attachment to culturally dominant values and rehabilitate their uneasy position as pensioners (Ekerdt 1986).

The back-and-forth between celebrating freedom and activity creates a distinctive narrative of retirement. Older adults value continued activity, which lets them distance themselves from the dreaded figure of the fourth age and the stigma of retirement. They also celebrate the possibility to do absolutely nothing for extended periods, a possibility that materializes their emancipation

²¹⁴"Pour occuper, parce qu'aujourd'hui on a aucun mérite à ça, pour occuper ma vie quand j'ai pris ma retraite, je suis allée travailler la nuit à l'accueil des sans abris porte de la Chapelle."

²¹⁵"J'ai une copine, Valérie, avec qui je discutais, qui vit à Bordeaux, avec qui je discutais de tout et de rien, euh. Et elle disait, elle me dit "Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire à la retraite ?" Je lui dis "Écoute il faut absolument que je trouve une assoc' avec des belles idées", et elle me dit "Ah j'ai une vieille copine qui", alors j'ai joint la vieille copine qui, elle m'a dit "Ah bah je cherche", et voilà ça s'est fait comme ça."

from the obligations of formal employment. In sum, older adults attempt to reconcile competing images of retirement as freedom and as continued activity by selectively committing to the norms of successful aging while preserving moments of rest. This spawns complex and sometimes contradictory accounts of their retirement, as in Christophe's case. Christophe has chosen to retire a few years ago and frames this decision as a protest against transformations in his profession as an optician, particularly the increased intervention of the State through norms and regulations. To him, retirement represents freedom as well as political independence. Christophe jokes: "Ah well, I live like religious dignitaries in the Middle Ages. [...] I spend my days doing nothing and my nights sleeping. [laughing].²¹⁶" But he is also invested in several other activities and projects. He built his house and spent the last ten years putting up walls and pouring concrete. He used to own a boat and go sailing nearly every weekend during the winter, and now rides his motorbike across France to visit relatives and explore back country roads. In his words: "I would say I've got quite a lot going on."²¹⁷ Christophe claims two distinct social roles: the retiree who has earned their rest and a life of leisure through hard work over the past fifty years, and the senior who remains active, creative, and even productive throughout retirement. Repetti (2015) identifies this tension in retirees' narratives and traces it back to the uneasy coexistence of two representations of retirement. Retirement is both a hard-won social achievement of the welfare state and an institution challenged by the neoliberal push for longer work lives and less publicly-funded safety nets. Older individuals draw on one or both discourses at a time, alternatively celebrating and finding excuses for their life without work in a work society.

Leisure activities are valuable resources in that regard. Through strategic choices in leisure (for instance privileging collective and organized leisure or leisure that is presumed to have health benefits), older adults display their alignment with expectations of continuous and productive activity. Gymnastics classes, walking groups, and computer courses show the goodwill of their practitioners who accept to devote part of their time to a hypothetical fight against aging. In senior centres, the discourse of successful aging is materialized in the offer of leisure activities designed to maintain the body, expand the mind, and protect the brain of older adults (Marhánková 2011). Leisure programs in aged care institutions abide by the same logic. A nursing home leisure coordinator (met during a *Golden-Age Games* workshop) explains that she likes to schedule what she calls "cognitive sports" such as riddles and charades. Leisure coordinators understand their mission as keeping seniors busy, as suggested by a coordinator's joke that one of the residents "is happy when we're not around, it gives her some free time."

Older adults who engage in organized leisure take advantage of the opportunity to perform activity and busyness while circumventing organizers' expectations and demands. Copelton's (2010) study of a hospital-sponsored walking group for older adults highlights this ambivalence. Walking group participants engage in a discursive performance that aligns with expectations of activity and health maintenance. At the same time, they quietly reorient the walking group

²¹⁶"Ah, je suis comme les prélats au Moyen-Âge. [...] Je passe la journée à ne rien faire et la nuit à dormir. [rires]".

²¹⁷"Je dirais que j'ai pas mal d'occupations."

toward sociality and fun and away from physical exercise and health concerns. They value their activity as a form of light but useful physical exercise, that lets them perform the role of responsible seniors who do what they need to do to age successfully. Video games can fit into a similar logic. They constitute a leisure activity deemed responsible and even virtuous by a discourse that has been gaining traction in the spaces and institutions of old age over the last decade; and they also create opportunities to have fun, enjoy themselves, or simply pass the time pleasantly.

“When Time Feels Slow”: Video Games And The Passage Of Time

The passage of time in later life is a difficult experience for aging individuals. The spectre of the fourth age, sickness and dependency, and the inevitable perspective of death (our own, but also the passing of our loved ones) weigh on everyday life in old age. Moments when nothing happens are not necessarily problematic and can even be valued, as Caradec (1999:69) notes: “If saving time (in actuality or in theory) is a driving element in technology innovation and diffusion, it can also hinder their dissemination, as not everyone wants to save time.” But empty time still has to be managed in order to avoid boredom, which becomes an existential threat in the last period of life. Dominique broaches the subject in relation to play:

It’s an escape, in fact, see. I’m evading the passage of time. Sometimes I’m thinking, “You don’t have much time left, you should perhaps be careful” [laughs]. But, well, it goes through, it’s not heavy. [*What do you mean, not much time left?*] Well, I’m 65, so, um. [...] Yes, it’s about the time I have left. [...] I think about death sometimes, I do.²¹⁸

Video games constitute a strategic resource for older adults as they accustom themselves to the change of tempo in their everyday life. De Schutter *et al.* (2014) identified two patterns in older adults’ incorporation of video games in their daily life. Some players deliberately set time apart in their schedule to play video games. They create moments of play in an otherwise busy life, framing video games as “time for myself”, to quote respondent Didier (p. 12). Other players value video games as a way to fill empty moments. Older adults find value in video games as a protection against boredom. While boredom is a staple of everyday life (and video game play) at all ages, it is particularly troublesome for older adults. Several interviewees mention their distress at the idea of wasting their time, as they are aware that it is limited and quickly decreasing. Video game play, as a potential activity that is always available, grants Jacqueline tranquility:

²¹⁸“C’est un échappatoire, en fait, hein. j’échappe au temps qui passe. Des fois je me dis t’as plus beaucoup de temps, il faudrait peut-être faire attention [rires]. Mais bon ça traverse, c’est pas lourd. [*Mais comment ça plus beaucoup de temps ?*] Ah, j’ai 65 ans, donc, euh. [...] Voilà, c’est par rapport au temps qui me reste, quoi. [...] L’idée de la mort peut me traverser, quand même.”

It is a guarantee that I won't get bored. First and foremost. It's that I, I don't, I don't fall into boredom because I have video games, that's for sure. In this last stage of my life, it's very important, really.²¹⁹

Video games prove particularly adapted to a specific rapport with time: letting time pass. The notion of killing time, that is, dealing with moments when nothing happens, frequently comes up in older players' accounts. Christophe explains that he plays when he has nothing to do, for instance when he is waiting for something or someone: "In fact, it's to distract myself, to pass the time."²²⁰ Nicole concurs: "Well I think it's a pastime, it passes. Yes. It, it clears my mind."²²¹ Jacqueline brings her games with her when she goes sailing with her husband so that she has them on hand "when time feels slow."²²² Interviewees often follow up these statements with reflections about addiction to video games. They remain cautious to distinguish this form of play (to pass the time) from a more immersed, more intensive play (to spend as much time as possible playing), still assigning video games a secondary place in the hierarchy of their leisure.

Video game play lets older adults fill up empty time when other activities have become unavailable or inaccessible, for instance because of a health issue or social isolation. Bernard explains:

I'm at the dentist's and I'm waiting for my appointment, otherwise I don't play. I play *Dominion* on my own, um, when, three or four AM, um, I don't have the energy to write and that's it. And it keeps me busy, in fact. The thing is also that I don't regret playing as long as I'm not capable of doing anything else.²²³

Video games accommodate short bursts of satisfying play in any circumstances and with a moderate amount of investment. This echoes the process of *déprise*, with the progressive reallocation of one's diminishing time and energy away from some activities and toward others to accommodate the changes that come with aging (Barthe *et al.* 1990). In the literature on older adults and video games, instances of video game play as a strategy to manage slow time abound. The categories of "compensators" and "time wasters" in De Schutter & Malliet's (2014) typology of older players exemplify this logic. "Time wasters" rely on video games to "traverse an abundance of free time" and occupy otherwise lost or boring moments (p. 79), often hoping to be getting something worthwhile out of play (like cognitive training or intellectual satisfaction) in order to turn useless time into useful time. "Compensators" are much less preoccupied with productive play and more worried about simply finding something to do: "To these respondents, digital game play was instrumental in traversing long periods of undesired

²¹⁹"C'est la garantie que je ne m'ennuie pas. D'abord. C'est que je, je n'ai, je ne sombre pas dans l'ennui parce que j'ai les jeux vidéo. Ça c'est clair. Dans cette dernière étape de ma vie, c'est même très important."

²²⁰"En fait c'est pour me distraire, pour passer le temps."

²²¹"Bah je trouve que c'est un passe-temps, ça passe. Oui. Ça, ça me change les idées."

²²²"Quand le temps est long".

²²³"Je suis chez le dentiste et j'attends mon tour, sinon je joue pas. Je joue à Dominion tout seul, euh, lorsque, trois, quatre heures du matin, euh, j'ai pas le courage d'écrire et voilà. Et ça m'occupe, en fait. En sachant que je ne regrette pas d'y jouer parce que je ne suis pas capable de faire autre chose."

time, mainly due to the fact that meaningful activities and social contact were scarce or absent” (p. 81). In Delwiche & Henderson’s (2013:217) study of older MMORPG players, a respondent reports: “i am retired and this game has consumed much of what would otherwise be many dull days.” Jacqueline echoes this sentiment: “I even think I play too much. But now it sort of fills up a part of my day.²²⁴” In summary, older players find value in video games that let them indulge in doing nothing while still doing something. The status of video games as an indulgence is paradoxical when considering the success of the silver gamer discourse, which frames video game play as a virtuous and productive form of leisure conducive to health maintenance and social integration. Nonetheless, it is the notion of slow time, not productive time, which dominates older players’ relationship with video games.

A Matter Of Self-Control

Older adults are preoccupied with maintaining control over their time. Themes of self-control and time management crop up throughout their stories about everyday life and activities. It is particularly visible in their anxiety regarding addiction to video games, which worries older players not necessarily because of its implications in terms of mental or physical health, but because it signifies a total loss of control over their time (*cf.* Chapter 1.3.). Interviewees are prone to framing their practice as excessive. Although the interview guide intentionally did not mention addiction, the topic came up in every interview. For instance, when Christophe was asked where he played, he felt the need to add: “There is no, I would say, there is no addiction to any game. I’m not injecting myself with it every morning.²²⁵”

Older players are intent on proving to others and themselves that they are not addicted to video games. They explain that they do not play often; if they play often, they note that they do not play for long; and if they play every day for longer periods, they make sure to mention periods during which they stopped playing as proof that they could stop at any time. Isabelle reflects on her practice along these lines:

No but I’m wondering, indeed, am I able to stop? It so happened that, since my previous phone, a week ago, broke down. [...] So I was without my phone for three days, several days. I got my new phone and I had it for a few days before downloading the game. In a way, that’s my answer.²²⁶

Accidental or intentional breaks in the practice play an important part in older players’ narratives. Jacqueline explains:

²²⁴“Je pense même que je joue trop. Mais maintenant ça occupe un peu une partie de ma journée.”

²²⁵“Il n’y a pas de, je dirais, il n’y a pas d’addiction à un jeu quelconque. Je ne me fais pas de perfusion tous les matins.”

²²⁶“Non mais je me dis, effectivement, est-ce que je suis capable d’arrêter ? Il s’est trouvé que, comme mon précédent téléphone, il y a une semaine, est tombé en panne. [...] Donc je suis restée déjà trois jours, plusieurs jours sans téléphone. J’ai eu mon nouveau téléphone et je suis restée quelques jours, et j’ai retéléchargé le jeu. Finalement, la réponse elle est là.”

it happens that I decide to go without it. For instance, I went and spent a week in Annecy where I have grandchildren, where I have a Polynesian grandson. [...] For a week, I had decided not to bring anything to be entirely focused on what I was going to do. I find it very important not to depend on it.²²⁷

Several interviewees limit their play to make sure that they are not dependent on their games. Both Christine and Marie have uninstalled (more or less permanently) games that they felt were taking up too much of their time. De Schutter *et al.* (2014) notice a similar pattern among older players, who frequently refer to addiction or even characterize themselves as addicts even though, as the researchers note, they fulfill none of the clinical criteria for video game addiction.

At first glance, the theme of addiction is a throwback to the moral panics of the 1990s and the pathologizing discourse about the risks of video games for fragile psyches. However, older adults' accounts suggest that they are not worried about potential psychological distress, but about the social and moral implications of their choices regarding time expenditure. The phenomenon is not exclusive to older players. Ter Minassian *et al.* (2021) highlight that video games are embedded in a moral economy of daily life that assigns different values to different activities depending on the social roles, responsibilities, and relationships of the players. Gerber (2015) notes that the acceptability of the practice strongly depends on the amount of time it takes, and particularly the amount of time it takes away from other, more reputable activities, such as work or family life. Still, the preoccupation with time management in digital play is particularly intense for older adults given the contradictory meanings of time in old age.

Older adults' insistence that machines should be compliant rather than "smart" further illustrates their preoccupation with maintaining control over their life. Martine has kept her old computer in order to try and avoid upgrading her operating system: "because for me a robot should obey me. If a robot does stuff that I haven't asked, I'm not okay with it. I hate that."²²⁸ Yvette is annoyed by the game she plays because she feels like game designers attempt to trick her into playing a certain way. Yvette is particularly incensed at the fact that the victory screen (with the score and stats of the last game) only appears briefly before redirecting to a page offering other games and activities. She resents having to negotiate with her game because it takes unwelcome initiatives that she does not know how to deprogram: it "was really annoying because, firstly, they were trying to get you to do other things. [...] But you get the impression that they, it annoys them, that there's someone who only uses them to play sudoku, see."²²⁹

²²⁷"il arrive de décider de m'en passer. Par exemple, je suis allée passer une semaine à Annecy où j'ai des petits-enfants, où j'ai un petit-fils polynésien. [...] Pendant une semaine, j'avais décidé de rien emmener pour être complètement donnée à ce que j'allais faire. Je trouve très important de ne pas dépendre."

²²⁸"Parce que pour moi un robot ça doit m'obéir. Si un robot fait des trucs que moi je lui ai pas demandé, moi je suis pas d'accord. Moi j'ai horreur de ça."

²²⁹"[Il] était très pénible parce que, d'abord ils essayent de vous faire faire d'autres choses. [...] Mais on a l'impression qu'ils, que ça les énerve, qu'il y ait quelqu'un qui ne les prennent que pour le sudoku, c'est tout, voilà."

In summary, older adults maintain an image of themselves as responsible adults able to fulfill their social obligations even in the absence of work and outside constraints. At the same time, they reclaim a right to decide how they spend their time and particularly a right to leisure or even idleness. While they may seem contradictory at first sight, these two attitudes are grounded in the same concern: a claim to sovereignty over one's time after a life devoted to work and other obligations.

6.2. Video Games And The Structure Of Everyday Life

Old age upends pre-existing structures and frames of reference, particularly in the conduct of everyday life. Older adults engage in “time work” and engage in leisure activities that recreate an alternation between free time and work(-like leisure and obligations). Video game play takes place in the context of this reorganization of daily life, sometimes as a core activity but most often as a brief moment of respite in the interstices of daily life or as a part of a daily routine.

“I Schedule My Week”: Leisure As A Temporal Structure In Old Age

In old age and particularly in retirement, individuals reconfigure their everyday life, a process in which leisure plays a strategic role. Old age prompts a reorganisation of social temporalities (Petit 2012). Time and its management are central in older adults’ efforts to compose with the changes and challenges of aging:

Through [] transactions with ourselves, what we have become and what we were, with others, those who are here as well as those who are no longer with us, with the material and relational environment that contributes to this work on ourselves, we are fundamentally negotiating with the passage of time. (Membrado 2010:x)

There are variations in older adults’ rapport with time. For instance, Membrado highlights that older women’s experience significantly differs from older men’s given that women bear the brunt of domestic work and care obligations throughout the life course. Nonetheless, older adults share a common experience of time that stems from their position at the margins of productive time, a detachment from linear time in favour of cyclical time, and, as time goes by, the perspective of (one’s own and loved ones’) approaching death.

Older adults who enter or near retirement engage in a task of time (Ekerdt and Koss 2016). They attempt to establish a schedule that provides a sense of structure and identity formerly provided by formal work and other obligations. This organization ensures that the everyday remains familiar and predictable even in the absence of work. Individuals reproduce the conditions of working life by embracing the busy ethic (Ekerdt 1986). They commit to continued activity, notably through hobbies, voluntary work, family care activities, *etc.* Older adults can also try to replace work with leisure activities that are structurally similar to work, particularly in terms of temporal constraints. When asked about their life in old age, interviewees all provide a detailed timetable through which they emphasize that they are busy (in the sense that they engage in a variety of stimulating, productive, and helpful activities) and organized (in the sense that their life is structured and full). Martine explains: “I got my agenda, I schedule my week, I know that this day I’ll have that visit, for instance, or that day I’ll go and

buy groceries.²³⁰” Michel says of his spouse and him that “[w]e are structured, the both of us²³¹.” Michel details his daily schedule: breakfast, some gardening, washing the dishes, either cleaning up the house or buying groceries, a nap, some DIY and home improvement, work for his volunteer job, tea, watching an auction sale TV program and then a political program, cooking and then eating dinner, and finally watching a movie. They go to the supermarket on Wednesdays, the farmer’s market on Thursdays, and Michel’s mother-in-law comes for lunch every Sunday. Yvette provides a similarly comprehensive schedule, down to the menu of each of her meals and the TV shows she watches every day.

Leisure plays a role in recreating or reproducing structure in every life in old age. Interviewees provide numerous examples of this pattern. Yvette cherishes a TV trivia quiz, “*Questions pour un Champion*”: the long-running show provides her with a sense of continuity with her previous life, before she moved to a retirement community, and speaks to her interest in culture and general knowledge. It also helps her wait an appropriate amount of time between mid-afternoon snacks and dinner. It is important for her not to eat dinner too early. She does her best to maintain the schedule she had before she retired from her job as a teacher. Yvette also occupies part of her afternoons by playing tabletop *Scrabble* with a neighbour. She regularly meets up with another friend in downtown Paris to sit in a café and do crossword puzzles (specifically the famous Michel Laclos grids) all afternoon. It is not accidental that Yvette, who lives in a retirement community with shared spaces and services, is the interviewee for whom leisure activities most visibly articulate everyday life.

Leisure is a source of structure and meaning for older adults who still work or volunteer part-time. Philippe organizes his life around his passion for planes. He flies the plane he has built himself as often as possible, hangs out with other plane builders and amateur pilots at the airport, and reads forums and websites about planes and flight simulators every morning. Plane-unrelated activities also contribute to structure his everyday life: meeting up with friends who live nearby for a pre-dinner drink, having his mother over once a week, and sailing with his brother once a month. Christophe has many interests and leisure, but it is his involvement in home improvement that most significantly structures his day-to-day life. He started building his current house ten years ago with a construction engineer friend and has since been methodically working through his to-do list, setting up doors and windows, heating and electricity, and closets and bathrooms. Christophe’s time is punctuated by his progress in this unending list of tasks:

Last week I modified the electrical panel because there was, norms have changed, so I had to update it. And tonight I’ll work on taking my oven apart, change its heating

²³⁰“J’ai mon agenda, je programme ma semaine, je sais que tel jour je vais avoir telle visite par exemple ou tel jour je vais aller faire les courses.”

²³¹“Nous sommes structurés tous les deux”.

elements which are fried, and put it back together again. And this morning I took a pressure washer apart. Before it didn't turn on, and now it does.²³²

Leisure takes on a particular significance in aged care institutions where residents have limited access to the outside world and fewer domestic obligations or informal work than other older adults. Leisure becomes the primary means through which institution employees structure the day for residents. The experience of *Golden-Age Games* workshop participants illustrates this pattern. The passage of time within a total institution is closely monitored and structured by managers and supervisors, not only because the coordination of a large group and the administration of treatments demands it, but also because a strict schedule is thought to promote discipline and self-improvement (Foucault 1975). In the context of aged care institutions, leisure constitutes an arena of maintenance, monitoring, and even progress, with leisure activities working as “disciplinary practices” and work on the self (Marhánková 2011).

In aged care institutions, leisure is scheduled. There are instances of spontaneous and unplanned leisure activities such as residents' card games or occasional strolls. Nonetheless, institutional leisure remains dominant and inscribes residents' leisure activities into a tightly controlled management of time. Leisure activities are often set up in advance. In many cases, the schedule is posted on the signboards in the communal spaces of the institution, announced over loudspeakers or mentioned directly by leisure coordinators to residents, and even emailed to residents' relatives. However, leisure activities are not rigidly set, and supervisors frequently reschedule them, cancel them, or switch them, sometimes at the last minute. I experienced it firsthand a few times:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] I come in at 2PM, the time that my *Golden-Age Games* contact had given me based on what local coordinators told him. The person sitting at the front desk tells me that I'm early; volunteers are not here yet. She tells me to come back at 2:45PM. I oblige (and even come back a little bit earlier, around 2:35PM), only to find out that the workshop has already begun and I'm late.

Moreover, when leisure schedules were put up in common rooms, they often gave inexact or incomplete information about *Golden-Age Games* workshops. This unpredictability limits residents' ability to set up their own schedule. It also increases their dependency on leisure supervisors, who decide which residents to keep in the loop.

In nursing homes, the *Golden-Age Games* workshops contribute to the cyclical time of the institution, in which recurring and predictable events structure everyday life. A sense of routine pervades the workshops, which bring together the same few people to do the same thing week after week for months on end. Organizers, and to an extent participants, have an ambivalent

²³²“La semaine dernière j'ai modifié le panneau électrique parce qu'il y avait, les normes ayant changé il fallait que je mette aux normes. Et ce soir je vais m'attaquer à démonter mon four, lui changer ses résistances qui ont cramé, et le remonter. Et ce matin je me suis démonté un karcher. En fait il démarrait plus, maintenant il tourne.”

relationship with this aspect of the workshops. On one hand, routine facilitates a sense of comfort and familiarity among participants, who are more inclined to come back. On the other, routine is also associated with boredom by both participants and organizers, either because they tire of doing the same thing over and over again or because participants become autonomous, and volunteers find themselves with nothing to do.

Video Games In Daily Life: Breaks, Routines, And Rituals

Video games have the potential to become an everyday companion in old age. Daily play is frequent among the older adults I met during my research²³³. Martine and Sylvie stand out as players who invest several hours a day in their favourite game nearly every day for long periods. They also engage in other games for shorter periods, although not necessarily every day. While interviewees engage differently with video games, nearly all of them play every day and have done so over long periods (several weeks to several months at a time). At the time of the interview, two-thirds of interviewees play every day, and those who do not play at least a few times a week. Several interviewees play games whose mechanisms reward daily play, such as the bonus earned every morning in *Candy Crush* or the daily maintenance required in *Forge of Empires*. Some games are inscribed in specific sociabilities, for instance with one's spouse, as for Dominique and Bernard who occasionally play the deckbuilding game *Dominion* together, or relatives, as for Michel who plays with his daughter and son-in-law when they come to visit. Martine and Sylvie play "small" games such as puzzles or hidden-object games to take breaks from the time-intensive roleplaying games they play. Nonetheless, interviewees also mention extended breaks in their practice. Even if they play everyday for a time, they occasionally stop playing for several weeks at a time, for instance when they go on vacation or when the weather is more amenable to other leisure activities. Moreover, daily play is not the norm among older video game players. The Ludespace survey suggests that, in all age groups, only a fourth to a fifth of video game players play every day (Ter Minassian *et al.* 2021). That said, several interviewees would not spontaneously admit to playing every day or even acknowledge their practice as playing video games. The frequency of their play became apparent over the course of the interview, sometimes taking the form of a confession or revelation. When older adults engage in daily digital play, they do not readily admit to it.

As for the pace of their play, interviewees generally play in short sessions of fifteen minutes on average, at least in the games they play every day (often casual puzzle games played on the phone or tablet): *Solitaire*, *Cooking Fever*, *Ruzzle*, etc. Philippe estimates that he plays between fifteen minutes and an hour per session on his flight simulator. Michel guesses that he plays his *Solitaire 250+* between a few minutes and a half-hour every day. Nicole thinks she plays five to ten minutes several times a day with *Homescapes* on her phone or *Stand O' Food* on her computer. Frequent but short play sessions blur older adults' perception of their practice. They

²³³As is often the case with ethnographic data, caution is needed insofar as this information is self-reported and the complex meanings and representations of video games are conducive to an over- or under-estimation of playtime by players.

find it difficult to decide whether they play a lot given that video games are an everyday occurrence but take up a very small part of their day. This trend is exemplified by Nicole, who explains: “I don’t play that much, I play occasionally several times a day, but I play nearly every day.”²³⁴

Video games often find their way in older adults’ lives in the form of quick breaks, small rituals, and daily routines. As Thornham (2011:52) notes in her ethnographic work on video games,

[g]aming is not easily located in a particular temporal moment of immediate gameplay. Instead, it emerges as an enmeshed, lived, discursive and rhizomatic event that is part of the households’ quotidian routine.

Video games find their way into everyday routines and give their players a treasured opportunity to get away from work and obligations, take time for themselves, and pass the time pleasantly (Ter Minassian and Boutet 2015). Casual games in particular can fit into players’ lives without challenging their time structure and organization (Juul 2010). Casual games “function[s] in the ambiguous time and space between the myriad tasks we do on digital devices; between work and domestic obligations; between solitary play and social gaming; and between attention and distraction” (Anable 2013: n.p.). De Schutter *et al.* (2014) identify four time patterns in older adults’ video game play. Digital play can happen in sequence with other activities, as is the case for Isabelle’s ritual of playing *Gummy Drop* with her morning coffee. It can happen in tandem with other activities, like Nicole’s *Homescape* games while she waits for her pork roast to cook. Play can be a substitute for other activities, as is the case with Philippe’s flight simulators when the weather is bad. Finally, video games can help older adults avoid or retreat from unenjoyable moments, for instance when Michel skips the TV news that he cannot hear anymore and plays in his office instead. Some older players engage in hours-long intensive play sessions, but this remains an exception (among older players and video game players in general).

It is in the interstices of older adults’ everyday that video games feature most prominently. Activities that act as breaks and breathing spaces in the flow of older adults’ work or obligations reinforce a sense of structure and purpose in everyday life. Isabelle plays *Cooking Fever* on her phone during short breaks in her volunteering job or on the bus to and from her office. Nicole plays during the pauses in her domestic work:

Well, during the day. I was playing earlier today, see. I took a break. [laughing] And I played during my break. [...] Or sometimes in my kitchen, when I’m waiting for a dish to cook, that, that I have to keep an eye on. I have my phone, well, I’m in the kitchen, I take it a little bit, and I.²³⁵

²³⁴“Je joue pas tant, je joue de temps en temps plusieurs fois dans la journée, mais je joue pratiquement tous les jours.”

²³⁵ “Bah, la journée. Là je jouais, tout à l’heure, voilà. Je me suis pris une pause [rires] et j’ai joué pendant ma pause. [...] Ou des fois dans la cuisine, quand j’attends qu’il y ait un plat qui cuise, que, que je suis obligée de surveiller. j’ai mon téléphone, bon, je suis dans la cuisine, je le prends un peu, et puis je.”

Michel also takes breaks from the flow of housework and social obligations that structure his everyday life:

On a Sunday morning, because since there are going to be oysters to open when my mother-in-law comes over, but I know that in what I've done, since we woke up early and got up not too late, I have a decent stretch of time Sunday morning to play a game for a little while that can come up to, I don't know, a half-hour.²³⁶

Older adults instill a sense of structure and stability in their lives through the establishment of routines and habits that constitute temporal landmarks. Yvette plays sudoku sometimes in pen-and-paper format and sometimes digitally, but she does so at the same moment every day, right after watching an early TV program and eating her breakfast, and in the same spot, sitting on the left half of the couch in her living room.

Routines occasionally become rituals as older adults imbue regular instances of play with specific meanings. They constitute small havens throughout the day, retreats from obligations and unexpected events, and experiences of pleasure and respite. These moments of play are often liminal rituals that start or end the day. They mark a transition and allow older players to retreat into a personal space and time, as does Christine: "I like it, in the morning, when I eat breakfast, after I play games of *Gummy Drop* [laughing]. It's a little ritual."²³⁷ For Christine, video games are both a morning and evening ritual: "After breakfast. And I have trouble falling asleep without having played a round, really. [laughing]. [...] You see what I mean, I can't turn off the light before playing a round."²³⁸ Even older players who do not institute rituals around their practice tend to have a preferred time of day for play. Mornings and evenings are a popular choice. Yvette explains: "So I prefer to play in the morning. [...] Because. That said, I'll tell you, yesterday evening, I played. And I realized that, it, it disturbed my sleep. [...] So finally I prefer to play in the morning."²³⁹ Marie draws on the gameplay of *Candy Crush* to justify her preference for evening play:

And then I realized that sometimes when you play in the evening, after 10 PM, games are easier on the phone than the tablet. [Oh, and how do you explain that?] Ah well, I

²³⁶ "Un dimanche matin, parce que il y aura les huîtres à ouvrir quand ma belle-mère va venir, mais je sais que dans ce que j'ai fait, comme on s'est réveillé de bonne heure et levé pas tard, j'ai une belle plage dans le dimanche matin pour faire un jeu pendant un bon moment qui peut peut-être égaler, je sais pas, une demi-heure."

²³⁷ "J'aime bien, le matin, quand je déjeune, après je fais des parties de *Gummy Drop* [rires] C'est le petit rituel."

²³⁸ "Après le petit-déjeuner. Et j'ai du mal à m'endormir sans en avoir fait une série, quand même [rires] [...] Vous voyez ce que je veux dire, j'éteins pas la lumière avant d'avoir fait ma série."

²³⁹ "Alors je joue de préférence le matin. [...] Parce que. Quoique, je vais vous dire, hier soir, j'ai joué. Et je me suis rendue compte que, ça me, ça me perturbait dans mon sommeil. [...] Alors finalement, je préfère jouer le matin."

don't know, it's a mystery! Tell no one because they'll change their tactic otherwise [laughing].²⁴⁰

For Martine, it is the game itself that becomes a habit: “because I've done it so many times, this one, that I'm starting to know it by heart [laughing]. It's such a pleasure, I could replay, I don't know, I could play it until the end of my life, this game.”²⁴¹

²⁴⁰“Et puis je me suis rendue compte que quelque fois quand on joue le soir, au-delà de 10 heures, les jeux sont plus faciles sur le téléphone que sur la tablette. [*Ah oui, et vous expliquez ça comment ?*] Ah bah ça j'en sais rien, c'est mystérieux. Le dites à personne parce que sinon ils vont changer leur tactique [rires]”

²⁴¹“Parce que je l'ai fait tellement de fois, celui-là, que je commence à le savoir par cœur [rires]. C'est tellement un plaisir, moi je peux le rejouer je sais pas, je pourrais le jouer jusqu'à la fin de ma vie, ce jeu.”

6.3. Sharing Time: The Sociality Of Video Game Play In Old Age

Although a majority of older adults play on their own, older players' practices are still embedded in social relationships and interactions. This section considers older adults' video game play through the lens of sociability and time. Through video game play, older adults allocate time to others and time to themselves. The first half of the section considers collective play in the *Golden-Age Games* project and the place participants and organizers give to socializing activities. The second half examines interviewees' play and the occasional participation of other people (players, relatives, friends). Both illustrate how video game play contributes to structuring daily life, supporting pre-existing activities and relationships, and furthering a sense of control and independence in old age.

Lonely Gamers?

Older adults' digital play is embedded in wider debates about video games, social isolation, and the value of gaming sociabilities. Despite a discursive shift in the early 2000s, video games still have an adverse reputation. Moral panics have durably framed video games as dangerous media that fosters addiction, violence, but also antisocial behaviours and social isolation. This fuels the anxiety of video game players who attempt to distance themselves from a "geek" and excessive form of play characterized by immersion, escapism, and fantasy fulfillment (Thornham 2011). Players try instead to situate themselves as "normal" gamers whose practice centres around "an insistence (overt or subtle) that gaming is only enjoyed, and should only be enjoyed as a social activity" (p. 71). Alain comments that the intensive play of his younger colleagues is a "social fracture, in a way". Marie expresses a more general worry regarding digital technology: "So we're in a communication society and we don't really communicate anymore", "we're really becoming an individualist society²⁴²". Older players mostly worry about other (more intensive, younger) players, but many also police their practice to keep addiction and isolation at bay.

In contrast with anxieties about antisocial gaming, actors involved in the rehabilitation of video games argue that they socialize their players (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). They frame digital play as a prime opportunity to meet new people, reinforce existing relationships, and foster a sense of community. In an instrumental perspective, the experience of play becomes secondary to the sociality that video games foster. In the *Golden-Age Games* project, organizers highly value workshops as spaces of socialization:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] A volunteer draws one of his colleague's attention to a group of participants talking to each other: "Look, they're getting to know each other!" The second volunteer answers: "Well, that's kind of the point, isn't it?"

²⁴² "Alors on est dans une société de communication et on communique plus vraiment", "on devient vraiment une société individualiste".

Such arguments find their inspiration in research on video games and digital technology in the social sciences. Video game play tends to support pre-existing social relationships and social networks (Kowert and Kaye 2018), something that the Internet (DiMaggio *et al.* 2001), digital media (Horst & Miller 2013), and online communities (Casilli 2011) also do. Video games are embedded in social contexts and player sociabilities that permeate the experience of play (Kowert and Quandt 2017). Social relationships and interactions take place both in-game, between players as they play, and in the periphery of play itself (through conversations about a game, when watching others play, and within player communities). Some genres use social interactions as gameplay mechanisms and fundamental aspects of narrative-building, most notably in online worlds (Taylor 2009). Despite persistent representations of video game play as a lonely and desocializing endeavour, it proves difficult to be truly alone when one plays, and even solo play holds potential for sociality (Simon 2007).

This complicates the notions of social play and solo play that players, organizers, and myself use to categorize the contexts of older adults' play. I have used the phrase "solo play" to describe individuals who play single-player games on their own. Solo play is not always solitary: one may play next to other people, or the same game as them but at a different time, and still have a shared experience of play (Thornham 2011). Solo play is sometimes solitary play, as is the case for older adults who keep their play under wraps, almost never talking about it or playing in front of others. Overall, the social dimension of play is fluctuating and context-dependent rather than a dichotomous state between social and solitary.

"Play Is A Pretext, The Cherry On The Sundae"

The claim that digital play fosters social inclusion is a core argument in the silver gamer discourse. The medical and psychological literature on older adults and video games celebrates play's potential for creating relationships among players, particularly between older and young players. Research projects propose to "Persuad[e] older adults to socialize and exercise through ambient games" (Cornejo 2012) or explore the "Social Benefits of Playing Wii Bowling for Older Adults" (Schell *et al.* 2016), sometimes focusing on specific aspects of sociality such as "[...] Digital Games and their Potential to Enhance Intergenerational Interactions" (Costa and Veloso 2016). Intergenerational relationships have a particular importance in the silver gamer discourse. In social work and policy contexts, the term "intergenerational" characterizes exchanges between children, teenagers, or young adults on one hand and older adults on the other. Actors involved in the field of aged care largely share the belief that intergenerational relationships are good and that older adults want to spend time with young people. Several of the institutions that host *Golden-Age Games* workshops organize activities with residents' grandchildren or local schoolchildren. Intergenerational relationships are intended to mimic and potentially compensate for missing family dynamics, namely the rapport between grandparents and grandchildren. The silver game discourse assimilates intergenerational relationships into its narrative, particularly with the argument that video games can successfully bring in young people who would otherwise be reluctant to spend time with older adults:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The local coordinator tells me that *Golden-Age Games* is successful because it's not the kind of intergenerational initiative where young people are here just to be nice. In the workshops, volunteers and participants share an interest and have fun: "Both are happy." [...] With the Wii, "what seniors like" is that volunteers genuinely want to be there. [...] They don't come just because it's their job. She pauses and adds: "Well, of course, they wouldn't do it for free".

The positive moral values attached to social play tend to erase the complexity of sociality in play. Social play is not necessarily peaceful or enjoyable and conflicts are a common occurrence, as ethnographic accounts of video game play illustrate (Thornham 2011; Vossen 2018). The *Golden-Age Games* workshops feature instances of organizers scolding players, volunteers expressing their frustration with their work conditions, and participants snapping at each other. In a workshop where a participant is struggling to make his throw, another participant says in an aggravated tone: "She's making everybody wait!" Participants taunt each other and do not hold back:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] Two participants are playing *Wii Bowling*. They're good and the game is ruthless. They seem to be having a lot of fun. [...] One of the participants is not doing as well as she was before (no more strikes). The other one pretends to be concerned: "What did you eat for lunch?" [...] The other participant says dejectedly: "I had venison. - That's strange, because deer can run fast!" [...] Later, one of the participants tells the other: "Say what, Jeanne? Feelin' weak, Jeanne?" [...] One participant runs around the other one and tries to break her concentration. They're both laughing.

Elsewhere, a participant says of another (visually impaired) participant's throw, with a deadpan delivery: "Well, that's impressive. Especially for someone who can't see anything."

Solo play also generates tensions, particularly when relatives or friends disapprove players' interest in digital play. Marie lives with her son, who also plays video games, and this regularly provokes tensions. On one hand, "what happens is my now sixty-something son sometimes play games when we eat. It annoys me. I say nothing because I feel that since he's sixty I don't have a say, but I find it very annoying."²⁴³ On the other, "if he sees I spend a little money on *Candy Crush*, he gets angry. I say 'Listen, I do what I want, say, if I go downtown and buy a coffee, it's the same.'²⁴⁴" In Sylvie's guild, the unrequited love of one player for another wreaked havoc and led to the departure of the previous guild master. Sylvie also has to intervene when her guildmates are too demanding toward unskilled players or too greedy when sharing the bounty obtained after a raid. In summary, playing video games with others is not all about friendship

²⁴³"Alors ce qu'il y a c'est qu'il arrive à mon fils de maintenant 60 ans de jouer pendant les repas. Ça m'agace. Je dis rien parce que, je trouve qu'à 60 ans, j'ai plus à lui dire, mais je trouve ça très désagréable."

²⁴⁴"Si il voit que je dépense un petit peu à *Candy Crush*, il est rage. Je dis 'Écoute je fais ce que je veux, hein, si je vais en ville boire un café c'est pareil.'"

and fun: players have to manage the tensions, conflicts, and frustration that inevitably stem from social interactions.

Nevertheless, the *Golden-Age Games* project highly values social play. Several of its actors credit the project's popularity among older adults to the fact that it provides participants with a rare opportunity to build relationships, both with their peers (that is, other residents) and with young volunteers. Organizers sometimes argue that video games are an afterthought and that older adults come to the workshops first and foremost to meet people:

[field notes from a discussion with a coordinator and volunteers] A volunteer says: "What's cool is that we make people smile." He explains that it's his primary motivation for volunteering in *Golden-Age Games*, because older adults are often socially isolated. For instance, a lady comes to the workshop just to knit and chat; she doesn't play at all. The volunteer tells me that they "formed an attachment" to each other. [...] According to the volunteer, in the workshop that I'll visit later today, participants are sad when volunteers don't come (during holidays, for instance). [...] The volunteer mentions that in another workshop, there is no "attachment" and players are not very social; he seems to disapprove or be disappointed about this.

During the meet-up before a regional competition, a *Golden-Age Games* administrator tells one of the association's partners: "Play is a pretext, the cherry on the sundae, not an end in itself". Actors involved in the *Golden-Age Games* project are delighted whenever residents socialize with each other or with volunteers. In a workshop, the leisure supervisor is very proud to tell me that a resident who usually stays in her room has come to the workshop today and even participated in a quiz.

"And We Get To Talk!": Video Games As A Social Occasion

The sociality of *Golden-Age Games* workshops is anchored in video game play. Games and other activities provide opportunities for interactions, discussions, and even relationships that sometimes go beyond the workshops' boundaries. *Golden-Age Games* organizers often call attention to the more spectacular and heartwarming forms of togetherness in their events. It is a point of pride for them: in workshops and competitions, there are laughing fits and heart-to-heart conversations, budding friendships and team spirit. Nonetheless, moments like these are exceptional, almost by definition. The sociality in *Golden-Age Games* workshops is for the most part an understated one. It looks like two residents making small talk while waiting for the beginning of a workshop, volunteers cracking jokes at each other while they set up the console, or a resident walking by and waving to the group with a smile. It also looks like exasperated sighs, backhanded compliments, and outright conflicts.

The majority of *Golden-Age Games* workshops are relatively quiet with occasional bursts of noise and commotion. Many participants and volunteers are discreet and relatively shy,

struggling to find something to say or keep the conversation going, and local coordinators or leisure supervisors are often the most talkative people in the workshop. Neither participants nor volunteers talk much: they occasionally comment on the game or each other's performance, but most of the session goes by in silence, with the game's music and the life of the institution as background noise. A significant proportion of participants stay silent throughout the workshop or only make a few comments that receive no reaction. While this slow sociality does not seem to bother participants, it tends to make organizers uncomfortable. Local coordinators and leisure supervisors tell volunteers to help participants "come out of their shell", with mixed results:

[field notes from a workshop in an *EHPAD*] The volunteer sits with a resident to show her how the tablet works and starts asking her questions: "Where were you born?", "Where did you used to live?", "Have you ever traveled outside of France?" She tries to catch the participant's interest by looking for her hometown on *Google Street View*, but the resident hardly looks at the screen and is increasingly quiet. The volunteer desperately looks for a topic of conversation and bombards the participant with questions that receive a one-word answer.

Local coordinators sometimes take it upon themselves to energize *Golden-Age Games* events. A coordinator comments on a workshop that she facilitated alongside volunteers: "we tried to bring in some adrenaline, I don't know whether the elderly like that but it makes it livelier."

There are lively workshops, with multiple conversations going on at once, and even rowdy workshops, particularly in neighbourhood centres and senior clubs. In the centre where participants share the large common room with about twenty weavers, the three Wii players end up making so much noise that one of the weavers comes over to ask them to calm down. In both quiet and turbulent contexts, participants enjoy the social aspect of *Golden-Age Games*. A participant exclaims "I like that better than bingo! I always fall asleep [in bingo]" and another chimes in "and we get to talk!" In *Golden-Age Games* events, video games occasionally take a backseat to other activities and sometime entirely disappear in the background. In a few extreme cases, workshops entirely revolve around board games, discussions, tech support, and/or manual activities such as nail art or cooking.

Participants and volunteers focus on the game. As a result, they mostly talk about their play or stay silent and watch the screen. They react to in-game events, give advice, encourage and congratulate each other, and joke about their performance. Volunteers and participants still manage to have conversations on other topics. Games such as puzzles, word games, and quizzes act as a springboard for conversation, as in the case of two participants who solve food-themed crosswords on the tablet while exchanging recipes and talking about the dishes they hate the most. In an *EHPAD*, a participant spends most of the workshop on the computer with a volunteer to try and print out pictures. At the end of the workshop, the two of them leave the computer and settle to watch the participant's photos of her family on her tablet. Participants sometimes manage to turn technical demonstrations into storytimes:

[field notes from a workshop in an *résidence-autonomie*] A volunteer sits with a participant who brought his tablet. [...] He asks the volunteer to look up the name of the village he comes from and tells stories about his childhood there. He tells the volunteer what to type in the browser, and with each picture, he recounts an episode of his youth. She does as he asks, listens to him, and shows interest: “I’m learning a lot!” He talks about the time he went to Germany at the end of the war to occupy the Ruhr and reminisces about Willhelm II’s statue in Coblenz, then asks the volunteer to find a picture of it online.

Conversations are usually related to or inspired by digital play in some way:

[field notes from a workshop in a *résidence-autonomie*] Two participants are playing *Wii Bowling*. A participant explains that she can play with either her right arm or her left arm: she is ambidextrous, because she was left-handed but had to use her right hand in school. [...] The participant mentions again that she was left-handed but had to learn how to use her right hand, and that impacts the way she drives or cut her meat. She says that now, in school, they let children be left-handed. The two participants and the volunteer start talking about education and how it has changed since the 1950s. They stop playing for a few minutes, although they are still standing in front of the screen and holding the controllers.

Conversations sometimes get in the way of play. In a local competition, a leisure supervisor calls out to the participant whose team is next onstage: “You got to come over here, ma’am, you’ll chat with your girlfriends later!” However, most of the time, it is play that interrupts other interactions:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] In front of the Wii, there are six participants, including two who are watching but not playing, and a volunteer. They banter and crack jokes. Everyone is focused on the game. A volunteer and a participant are discussing the best way to knock down the remaining pins. [...] One of the participants who is not playing tries to start a conversation about Mardi Gras: “I just realized that today is Mardi Gras!” Several of the other participants say “Ah!” but continue to watch the game. After a short silence, someone says that they should buy candy for Mardi Gras. The participant starts saying something, but the player succeeds at getting a difficult spare: everybody claps and congratulates her. No one mentions Mardi Gras after that.

Interactions and relationships between participants and volunteers sometimes expand beyond the confines of the *Golden-Age Games* events. Some participants and volunteers have each others’ emails, phone numbers, or social media contacts:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] A regular is missing. Volunteers ask another participant for news and, upon learning that she is sick, a

volunteer remarks “I should call her on her phone”. She calls but the participant doesn’t pick up. [...] The volunteer announces that the sick regular just sent her a text and promises to be there next time. Participants say that it’s good news and they’re relieved.

When participants and volunteers establish relationships beyond *Golden-Age Games*, it is often via social media and/or online games. In one city, several participants have a Facebook account and play Facebook games with some of the volunteers between workshops. Elsewhere, a participant and a volunteer play online *Scrabble* over the weekend.

Harley *et al.* (2010) emphasize the potential of video games to support sociality in old age in their study about *Wii Bowling* workshops in a nursing home. Researchers followed the project over the course of a year and observed a shift in the atmosphere and conduct of the sessions. After an initial focus on how to play the game, participants progressively put less emphasis on in-game performance and more on the social aspect of the experience. Play sessions became integrated into the everyday routine and space of the institution, with participants emancipating themselves from the facilitators and setting up a friendly competition with a neighbouring nursing home. While participants overall became more skilled, their in-game improvement did not trigger a more intense involvement in the game or interest in play. To the contrary, as difficulties receded, play skills became taken for granted and receded into the background. Harley *et al.* conclude that it is the sociality permitted by video game play that makes it meaningful to older adults:

Wii game playing has allowed the older people in these homes to accomplish technical literacy with new technology, to express their own values in new and collective ways, expressing claims to ownership of communal space and time, defining new meeting places and providing opportunities for instigating new social connections with their peers. Together these contribute to the older people in these homes being able to frame what constitutes meaningful use of a technology for them. (p. 172)

Indeed, alongside the pursuit of fun, there are many factors that encourage and motivate play: spending time with others, caring for someone, passing the time, doing what is expected, maintain a tradition, flirting with someone, educating a child, and so on. Coavoux and Gerber (2016) call attention to what they refer to as “dispassionate play”, that is, experiences of play in which individuals get involved not out of passion but out of obligation, compromise, or merely a sense of what is socially appropriate at a given time. The appeal of video game play as a social experience is not so much a pretext, then, than an integral part of play.

The back-and-forth between social and private moments in *Golden-Age Games* workshops illustrates the complexity of sociality in older adults’ play. In contrast with organizers’ celebration of video games as a source of social connection for isolated older adults, participants are not necessarily interested in meeting new people or chatting during workshops. Participants may appreciate the social aspect of collective video game play, but in many cases, they barely engage with volunteers or with each other. The social aspect of video game play is an enjoyable

option but not a desperate need for older adults. In old age, social networks narrow, particularly after 80 years old; but older adults are still involved in social activities as well as new and pre-existing relationships (Desquesnes *et al.* 2018). In *Golden-Age Games* workshops, residents' sociabilities regularly come up. A participant leaves the game to take a phone call from his family; another comes in at the very end of a local competition because she had gone for a walk.

Finally the average workshop's quietness reflects a common feature of video game play. Players emphasize the social and friendly dimension of their play to distance it from problematic and isolated play, but their practice is rarely as social as they make it out to be:

gamers insisted that it was always the social, which was important to gaming scenarios – that the game was a social support rather than an immersive medium. But my observations (and latterly the recordings) highlighted how, during gaming, gamers often ignored the rest of the room, concentrating instead on the game. Questions often went unanswered unless they related to what was directly going on in the game. Yet when I asked gamers about their memories of gaming scenarios, they remembered a socially inclusive space, where interaction and conversation were with friends and housemates and immersion in the game was infrequent (often it was not 'remembered' at all). (Thornham 2011:15)

Thornham later quotes an informant who reacts to a video recording of his play: "It's quite funny actually looking at this. Like I always talk about gaming being an ice-breaker and having a social function, but we're just both like zombies and just not communicating" (p. 139). Likewise, older players have to manage the tension between collective play's higher social value and the pleasures of solo video game play.

Precarious Gaming Sociabilities

Older adults rarely play with others, but those who do highly value these moments and relationships. Although Sylvie is proud of her skills and intent on improving her play, Sylvie is content with being in a relatively non-competitive guild:

They're not people who are very good at the game, but they're really nice people. Well. We're always on vocal chat, we, we talk a little bit about everything, we catch up with each other, about our lives, well.²⁴⁵

She contrasts the atmosphere in her guild with the general rudeness and lack of manners that she perceives, and disapproves, in the *World of Warcraft* world. Michel, who plays *Solitaire 250+* every day on his own, also engages in other forms of video game play, particularly when his youngest daughter and son-in-law come to visit:

²⁴⁵“C'est pas des gens qui savent hyper bien jouer, mais c'est des gens qui sont très sympathiques. Voilà. On est toujours sur vocal, on, on discute un petit peu de tout, on prend des nouvelles de l'autre, de sa vie, voilà.”

So it sometimes happens when my youngest daughter and Yanis visit, since we're together, because they're intensive players. They set up afternoons, evenings of play, *etc.* So I tested two or three games with them, um. That's good, because, um, I'd say, you see, we feel warm, you know what I mean, a warm atmosphere with them, it's the affective aspect, but the game itself, in fact, it doesn't interest me that much.²⁴⁶

Some older players manage to build relationships and expand their social networks through play. It is most often the case for those who identify as gamers and invest significant amounts of time and energy in their practice. Over the course of her *World of Warcraft* career, Sylvie has socialized in-game: "After, after, when my son had stopped playing, I started chatting with people in the game, and that's how I got into other guilds. Because I'm the kind of person who chats, see."²⁴⁷ She is proactive in establishing relationships with other players: "And so I was looking for a guild, I was all alone so I was bored. And one day I saw a post, in the general chat, and I applied."²⁴⁸ Sylvie illustrates Zhang and Kaufman's (2016) observation that older MMORPG players value the game for the social opportunities that it provides. Sylvie is however careful: she is involved in the guild that she joined four years ago and now leads, but she barely communicates with her teammates outside of the game and limits her interactions with strangers. It is a delicate act of balance between being social and polite without getting sucked into unwanted relationships or, as Sylvie puts it, "drama":

you must be very careful, because there are people who are very lonely in that game, really. People who are a bit on the margins of society, who have difficulties, who are sick, or who have a disability. Well. And, and these people are looking for, for social contact.²⁴⁹

Meeting people in or around a video game is not an easy task (*cf.* Chapter 5.2.). Martine has attempted to create connections with player communities and online spaces for years, to no avail. Martine's game of predilection is the *Zelda* franchise, and the characteristics of the game partly explain why she struggles significantly more than Martine to meet other players. The *Zelda* games are single-player adventure games that are not played online and whose gameplay does not rely on social features such as guilds or a chat. As a result, Martine has resorted to contacting people and groups that she has identified online in order to share her passion for the

²⁴⁶“Alors cela arrive quelque fois quand ma plus jeune fille et Yanis viennent, comme nous sommes ensemble, parce que ce sont des joueurs acharnés. Ils organisent des après-midi, des soirées de jeu, *etcetera*. Donc j'ai testé deux ou trois jeux avec eux, hein. C'est bien, parce que, euh, je dirais, si vous voulez, on est au chaud, vous voyez ce que je veux dire, une ambiance chaude avec eux, c'est le côté affectif, mais le jeu en lui-même, finalement, ne me passionne pas plus que ça.”

²⁴⁷“Après, après, quand mon fils ne jouait plus, je me suis mise à parler avec les gens sur le jeu, et c'est comme ça que je suis rentrée dans d'autres guildes. Parce que je suis du genre à parler, voilà.”

²⁴⁸“Et donc je cherchais une guild, j'étais toute seule, donc je m'ennuyais. Et un jour j'ai vu une annonce, dans le canal général, et je me suis proposée.”

²⁴⁹“il faut faire très attention, parce qu'il y a des gens très seuls sur le jeu, justement. Des gens qui sont un peu en marge de la société, qui ont des difficultés, qui sont malades, ou qui ont un handicap. Voilà. Et, et ces gens-là sont en recherche de, de contact.”

game, trade tips and strategies, and occasionally get help. She posts public messages on forums, contacts websites and YouTube channels, and emails associations and institutions. Martine's efforts are generally met with silence, but even when she receives answers, she finds herself unable to fit in the spaces that she managed to enter. For instance, her posts on a popular forum dedicated to video games, infamous for its toxic aspects and involvement in campaigns of harassment, generated responses that were mocking, incomprehensible, and often both. Interactions on this forum are steeped in a gamer "language" and the forum's vocabulary and memes. Martine thus had a particularly frustrating experience:

There are some forums, to um, to only mention one, it's jeuxvidéo.com. I'm not the only one who got thrown out very rudely. [...] I really have no, no qualms talking about them that way because they really weren't nice. [What did they...?] Either they don't answer at all. Or they answer in an incomprehensible lingo. Because they have some sort of shitty lingo, you understand absolutely nothing.²⁵⁰

Martine did manage to get in touch with other communities, but her disapproval of popular forms of "hardcore" play has complicated her integration. For instance, she got in touch with a local group of players but was disappointed after attending her first party with them, as they only played "war games" and fighting games like *Smash Bros*. Martine even contemplated creating her own online space for older gamers. Martine has now obtained a degree of notoriety as an older video game player and streamer, but this has not really solved her conundrum.

Older video game players also create video game sociabilities outside of gamer culture. A few interviewees mention the social relationships that they have built through play. Chantal has played the online quiz games *Ruzzle* and *DuelQuizz* on her phone for years. She smoothly transitioned from playing with pre-existing friends to online acquaintances:

we were playing at some point, with a bunch of friends, we'd signed up. [...] And then my girlfriends got bored, um. They played other games that I don't play. And so, I stayed with people I don't know at all, physically, I mean, but, um. Um. We talk, um, we talk with each other. So, there are two or three of them, see, we send each other short messages, well, well, and we play.²⁵¹

Philippe talks about his flight simulators with friends he knows from the local plane building club. Additionally, he visits flight simulators-themed online forums and occasionally posts on

²⁵⁰“Il y a certains forums, pour euh, pour parler que de celui-là, c'est jeuxvidéo.com. Je suis pas la seule à m'être fait jeté comme une malpropre. [...] J'ai vraiment aucune, aucun scrupule à parler d'eux de cette façon là parce qu'ils n'ont pas été sympa du tout. [Qu'est-ce qu'ils ?] Soit ils ne te répondent pas, carrément. Soit ils te répondent dans un jargon que tu comprends pas. Parce qu'ils ont un espèce de jargon à la con, tu comprends absolument pas.”

²⁵¹“On jouait un moment donné, euh, entre copains, tu vois, on s'était inscrits. [...] Et puis mes copines se sont lassées, euh. Elles jouent à d'autres choses auxquelles je joue pas. Et donc, moi je suis restée avec des gens que je connais absolument pas physiquement si tu veux, mais, euh. Euh. On se parle, euh, on se parle. Enfin, il y en a deux ou trois, voilà, on s'envoie des petits messages, voilà, voilà, et on joue.”

them: “Well I, I read. I posted a few times, well, to thank volunteers who had developed and published new planes.²⁵²” Even though Philippe rarely participates, he has taken an interest in a few other players’ careers: “there are people I’ve been following for ten years.²⁵³” Alain plays, among other things, the online Real-Time Strategy game *Forge of Empires* and makes use of its social features:

We meet people who on a personal level are nice, interesting. Since we make up teams, for instance in *Forge of Empires*, it’s the concept of the guild. Whatever the name. So a group that must work together a little bit to get ahead. So there we get distracted, we have small conversations that can be fun. There is also sometimes less pleasant stuff, but overall, it’s still quite positive.²⁵⁴

A defining feature of these in-game sociabilities is their limited scope. Older players who interact with others in-game and within spaces dedicated to games circumscribe these relationships to the context in which they emerge. In her ethnography of MMO players, Taylor (2009) observes that the boundaries between online and offline or in-game and not-game are blurry as players expand in-game relationships beyond the game world. However, in older players’ case, in-game acquaintances generally stay within the confines of the game. When I asked her whether she is in touch with *World of Warcraft* players “IRL” (“in real life”), Sylvie answers: “Outside of the game, um. Not really. There’s one person, um. Um, whose Facebook I have because he’s constantly on Facebook. We catch up, um, from time to time, especially when one of us is not playing. But that’s it.²⁵⁵” She concludes: “I don’t particularly want to, for now at least, to meet the people I play with. I don’t particularly want to meet them in real life.²⁵⁶” Alain has met interesting people through online games, but these relationships did not survive outside the game: “A few years ago, yes. I’d made friends with a guy who was a sales rep. [...] We’d talked a little outside of the game. And then I stopped playing, and he stopped too. After that, it stopped.²⁵⁷” Chantal has found a new circle of fellow players when her friends left *Ruzzle*, but exchanges are limited:

There are people who, well, who are random, and who keep playing with you. Their name, well not their name, their in-game name comes up. And that way, there are

²⁵²“Bah je, je lis. Je suis intervenu quelques fois, bah pour remercier des auteurs bénévoles de, qui ont mis à disposition du public des machines qui ont été développés.”

²⁵³“Il y a des gens, depuis dix ans, je les suis.”

²⁵⁴“On fait des rencontres sur le plan humain qui peuvent être sympa, intéressantes. Comme on fait des équipes, par exemple dans *Forge of Empires*, c’est la notion de guilde. Peu importe l’appellation. Donc un groupe qui doit œuvrer un petit peu les uns avec les autres pour faire avancer le schmilblick. Donc là on détourne, on a des petits échanges qui peuvent être sympa. Il y a aussi des fois des trucs moins plaisants, mais globalement, c’est quand même plutôt positif.”

²⁵⁵“En dehors du jeu, euh. Pas vraiment. Il y a une personne, euh. Euh, dont j’ai le Facebook parce qu’il est toujours sur Facebook. On prend de nos nouvelles, euh, de temps en temps, surtout quand un des deux joue plus. Mais c’est tout.”

²⁵⁶“J’ai pas particulièrement envie, pour l’instant en tout cas, de rencontrer les gens avec qui je joue. J’ai pas particulièrement envie de les rencontrer dans la vie réelle.”

²⁵⁷“Il y a quelques années, oui. Je sympathisais avec un gars qui était agent commercial. [...] On avait un petit peu échangé en dehors du jeu. Et puis après j’ai arrêté de jouer, lui aussi. Après il n’y a pas eu de suite.”

regulars, there have been three or four of them coming for years, and you see, it's "Hello, how are you?"²⁵⁸

Chantal does not attempt to deepen these relationships and is content with their relatively inconsequential nature: "Yes, so you see, we don't, we don't confide in each other, talk about our ages, our things, our stuff, see. But it's through the small exchanges we have."²⁵⁹

The situation is different in collective play settings like *Golden-Age Games* events. They are designed to help older adults establish new relationships, particularly among regulars or between participants and volunteers. Workshops also reinforce existing connections:

[field notes from a workshop in a neighbourhood centre] The two participants playing *Wii Bowling* are chatting while they play. Apparently, they're both going to the same "wellness day" event tomorrow. There will be a beautician coming in the morning and an astrologist in the afternoon. They talk about the fact that the organizer usually calls them to confirm a few days before the event (which suggests that they regularly attend these events together).

In another workshop, two participants who are exploring Google Street View look for their respective houses. They realize that they live in the same village when they both recognize the local police station: "see, we're neighbours!" Nevertheless, such occurrences are occasional. Both within gaming cultures and outside of them, older adults rarely develop sociabilities around their play.

Video Games And Close Relationships

While older adults' video game play is often solitary, it occasionally finds its way into older adults' relationships with their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Video games can be a topic of conversation, a shared interest, and sometimes (although rarely) an activity to do together. In old age, as many spaces of sociability such as the workplace become less accessible, leisure and play provide opportunities for sociality. For instance, Yvette has kept in touch with a friend after her move to a senior residence by regularly meeting up and playing crosswords together. As for Christophe, he maintains a good relationship with his neighbours through occasional barbecues and improvised pétanque games.

Video game play is often embedded in existing relationships from the outset given the importance of colleagues, friends, and relatives in the domestication of video games. Examples abound among interviewees: Chantal followed her group of friends on an online quiz game,

²⁵⁸"Il y a des gens qui, voilà, qui sont aléatoires, et qui continuent à jouer avec toi. Leur nom, pas leur nom, leur nom de jeu s'affiche. Et puis comme ça il y a des fidèles, il y en a 3 4 depuis des années, et tu vois c'est 'Bonjour, comment tu vas ?'".

²⁵⁹"Oui, alors tu vois, on se, on se fait pas de confidences, sur nos âges, nos trucs, nos machins, tu vois. Mais c'est à travers les petits échanges qu'on a."

Nicole played with her colleagues on their work computers, and Sylvie started playing *World of Warcraft* on her son's suggestion. This initial sociability tends to peter out over time, making older adult's video game practice a solitary one. However, older players sometimes stumble upon other players among their friends or relatives, and video games become a possible topic of conversation with others.

Older adults rarely share their video game play with relatives. When they do, they usually play or talk about games with their adult children rather than their grandchildren. The literature on video games and older adults confirms that grandparent-grandchild play is relatively rare and often relates to "dispassionate play" (Coavoux and Gerber 2016). In Caradec's (2001b) study on older adults and new technology, a grandmother who plays with her grandson illustrates that video game play can coexist with a strong disapproval toward the practice. The respondent plays video games with her grandson on his console but still dislikes the technology, fears its negative consequences on the child, and has no intention of buying a console. Even though older adults' play rarely involves their young relatives, several have fond memories of their children's play that carry on to their practice in old age. Sylvie makes the connection between the joyful moments she spent watching her then teenage sons playing video games and the fun she finds in her current *World of Warcraft* guild:

Ah yes, when the kids start laughing and joking around, we love that, see. And I miss that, now that I'm all alone, I miss that. That's also why I'm on *WoW*, a little bit, too. Because you spend time with young people.²⁶⁰

Alain does not play with his sons anymore but associates video games with the close relationship that he established with one of them after a difficult divorce:

Ah well, with my eldest son, we shared. At a point we lived, after the divorce, he wanted to stay with me while the other two went with their mom. And so we played games of, how is that called, *Dune*.²⁶¹

While children and occasionally grandchildren are the most visible relatives in older adults' play, other family members come up in their narratives. Horizontal family relations (with siblings, siblings-in-law, and cousins) are mentioned alongside direct descendants (such as children and grandchildren). Christine has a cousin who plays the same game and may have even been the person who introduced Christine to it. They talk about their performance, their successes, and in Christine's case, her unexpected win of a large sum of in-game money through a mini-game, which she jokes made her cousin "keel over with rage". Video games also support relationships with the in-laws and particularly sons- and daughters-in-law. Nicole sometimes

²⁶⁰“Ah ouais, quand les enfants se mettent à rire, à déconner, on adore, hein. Et moi ça me manque, maintenant que je suis toute seule, ça me manque. Pour ça aussi que je suis sur *WoW*, un petit peu aussi. Parce qu'on se retrouve avec des jeunes.”

²⁶¹“Ah bah avec mon fils aîné, on a partagé. A un moment donné on a vécu, après le divorce, il a voulu rester avec moi pendant que les deux autres allaient avec leur maman. Et donc on s'est fait des parties avec, comment ça s'appelle, *Dune*.”

talks about *Homescapes* with “her little daughter-in-law”, and Michel bonds with his adult daughter and her partner over video games. Michel highly values

the warmth that comes from being with these kids, because. It’s not because one of them is my daughter, but. They’re damn smart, they’re damn, um, social and affectionate beings, so, it’s, it’s such a nice atmosphere. So it’s a good time whether we’re playing together, having a meal together, a conversation, so, well, that’s it, really.²⁶²

The role of relatives in older adults’ video game play is complex. Initiatives that address the social isolation of older adults tend to focus on the family, particularly children and grandchildren. At first sight, it is a logical strategy, given the important role of in older adults’ social networks (Bidart 2010; Desquesnes *et al.* 2018). In contrast with the image of lonely elders abandoned by their children, older adults see their relatives relatively often. For every age group between 45-54-years-old and 85+-years-old, the proportion of individuals who spend time with relatives at least a few times a week is roughly the same, about 85% (Renaut 2011). Older adults also maintain sociabilities outside of their family, although this network strongly diminishes over time. Half of 65-74-years-old see their friends at least a few times a week, but the proportion goes down to a third of 85+-years-old.

However, when it comes to video game play, relatives are not significantly more present than friends. Kaufman *et al.*’s (2016) survey on older adults’ play shows that 33% of respondents play at least occasionally with their family and 22% do so with friends. Chantal started playing video games in order to join a group of friends with whom she engages in other leisure activities and regular outings: “so in the evening, starting at 11PM, well friends – it was mostly girlfriends –, see, starting at 11PM we would go absolutely wild on it.²⁶³” Philippe got into flight simulators through a colleague and friend. Nicole played point’n’clicks and mystery games for years with her colleagues before turning to a more solitary form of play. Video games come up in conversations, including with friends and acquaintances who do not play or prefer different games. Dominique mentions: “We talk about it with friends, um. I have an interested friend who lives around here, well I’ve talked to her about it before, see.²⁶⁴”

The presence of relatives, friends, and acquaintances in older adults’ play reflects the importance of digital technology and ITC in older adults’ sociabilities. The literature on older adults and ICT highlights that older users domesticate services such as instant messaging, video calls, or emails to maintain relationships with others and particularly with younger relatives. Digital technology becomes embedded in family relations and takes on intimate and affective

²⁶²“La chaleur d’être avec ces mômes, parce que. C’est pas parce que l’une des deux est filles, mais. Ils sont diablement intelligents, ils sont diablement, euh, des êtres sociaux et affectueux, enfin bon, c’est, c’est une ambiance tellement agréable. Donc c’est bien aussi que ce soit du jeu avec eux, dans un repas, dans une conversation, enfin voilà quoi, c’est ça, quoi.”

²⁶³“Entre copains, tu vois, on s’était inscrits. Et alors le soir à partir de 23 heures, enfin copains c’était surtout les filles, hein, à partir de 23h on se déchaînait là-dessus”

²⁶⁴ “On en parle avec des amis aussi, euh. J’ai à côté de moi une amie amatrice, bah je lui en ai déjà parlé, quoi.”

meanings. They are saturated with affect, particularly in the context of their inscription into strong relationships with loved ones, as is the case with cell phones as a technology that supports grandmothering (Sawchuk and Crow 2012). Digital technology and specifically ICT facilitate and symbolize attachment, availability to others, and connection (Fernández-Ardèvol *et al.* 2012). The archetypal illustration of this phenomenon is the family WhatsApp group. Jacqueline is an active contributor to her family's WhatsApp group, which was set up a few years ago by her eldest daughter:

On the other hand, as a family, we talk a lot with each other online. We made on WhatsApp a family blog that works super, super well. We see babies growing up, we see each others' trips, we see each others' outings. I send pictures when I sail; when there's been an interesting port of call, I send it to them. We never stop communicating, the thirty-two of us.²⁶⁵

Older adults integrate digital technology and media in their friendships and social network beyond the family. The technobiography of Jacqueline illustrates how sociabilities are intertwined and inseparable from digital technology in old age. Jacqueline's laptop is a key element in her social life: "And also because I moved around a lot. So everything was in my computer, in a way. My friends in particular."²⁶⁶ Jacqueline is quite invested in a correspondence circle with a few close friends: "So with a few people with whom I'm very intimate, we decided to pick one day a month to write to each other consistently. So we kept a journal that we pass around."²⁶⁷ The five participants to this correspondence started sending letters to each other twenty years ago, first in the mail and then online. The group talks about everything, from family news to politics, and includes one of Jacqueline's former suitors. Jacqueline also met her current husband through a dating website, an experience that itself supported another relationship, this time with a friend and neighbour: "it's my neighbour who told me "Oh, you should do that!" [...] And well, sometimes I'd go through all the requests I got with her. We'd have a good time of it."²⁶⁸

Taking Time For Myself

Older adults play on their own and value the privacy of their practice. The integration of video game play in their sociability is possible, but it is not necessarily something that they want. The isolation of older adults' play stems in part from the tensions around representations of old age

²⁶⁵"Par compte on échange beaucoup sur Internet en famille. On a fait sur Whatsapp un blog familial qui fonctionne à fond, à fond à fond. On suit l'évolution des bébés, on suit les voyages, on suit les sorties. Moi j'envoie des photos quand je navigue, quand il y a une escale intéressante je leur envoie. On n'arrête pas de communiquer, les 32."

²⁶⁶"Et aussi parce que j'ai beaucoup changé de lieu de vie. Donc tout était dans mon ordinateur d'une certaine manière. Mes amis en particulier."

²⁶⁷"Donc avec quelques personnes avec qui je suis très intime, nous avons décidé de choisir une date par mois pour s'écrire systématiquement quelque chose. Donc on a gardé un journal de bord qu'on échange."

²⁶⁸"C'est ma voisine qui me dit "Ah oui vous devriez faire ça." [...] Et puis parfois je décortiquais avec elle toutes les demandes que je recevais. On passait des bons moments."

and video games (as a youthful, dangerous, high-tech practice) and the exclusion of older adults from gamer spaces. Nonetheless, solitary play is also an experience that older players embrace and actively work toward protecting. It resonates with older adults' attachment to time sovereignty and efforts to set aside time for themselves. Older players do not advertise their practice: they rarely talk about it with others, do not put games or playing devices on display, and sometimes even hide them when they receive company (De Schutter *et al.* 2014). Almost all interviewees report that they do not talk about video games with others. If some do, they almost never take the initiative, like Nathalie: "I don't talk about it. [...] No, I wait for someone to offer or suggest. [...] I don't force it onto people."²⁶⁹ The decision not to talk about one's play reflects older adults' appreciation for video games as time for themselves and away from others. Jacqueline explains: "But no, I don't talk about play because I consider, once again, for me, that's an intimate and personal experience. [...] I don't see what I'd say and why I'd talk about it."²⁷⁰ Isabelle concurs: "[*What do you think about it, do you talk about it with people around you?*] Not really, not really, no. [...] Because, it's a personal thing, in fact."²⁷¹

Older players generally do not know whether people around them play video games, with the possible exception of one or two individuals. Michel illustrates this pattern:

Do I talk about it with other people? No, not really. Sometimes we'll talk about it a little, because my wife barges into the office and talks about this and that, so I tell her what I'm supposed to do in my game, but no.²⁷²

Besides his daughter and son-in-law, Michel does not know whether his relatives, friends, or acquaintances play. As a result, he never broaches the topic with them, which in turn prevents him from discovering other players. It is a circular issue: "In fact, you'd need to know whether people have the same play activity in common for us to maybe want to talk about it."²⁷³ Isabelle has an inkling that her children play, but not much more: "I think that my daughter plays, must play on her phone like me. And my son, he's always played, on a computer but I don't know what game."²⁷⁴ Alain leads computer workshops in his neighbourhood centre and knows a lot about the digital habits of the older adults he teaches, with one exception: "I don't know if there are many that play video games, I don't think. I'd have to ask them."²⁷⁵ Philippe knows other people who play flight simulators, both on the forums he regularly visits and in the club for

²⁶⁹ "J'en parle pas. [...] Non, j'attends qu'on me propose ou qu'on me suggère. [...] Je n'impose pas."

²⁷⁰ "Mais non, je ne parle pas du jeu parce que j'estime, là aussi, pour moi c'est une expérience intime et personnelle. [...] Je vois pas ce que je dirais et pourquoi j'en parlerais."

²⁷¹ "[*Qu'est-ce que vous en pensez, est-ce que vous en parlez avec les gens autour de vous ?*] Pas trop, pas trop non. [...] Parce que, c'est un truc qui est personnel en fait."

²⁷² "Est-ce que j'en parle avec d'autres gens ? Non, pas trop. Quelque fois on a un petit échange là-dessus, parce que mon épouse déboule dans le bureau et me dit lalala, alors je lui dis qu'est-ce que je suis censé faire dans ce jeu-là, mais non."

²⁷³ "En fait il faudrait savoir si les gens ont en commun la même activité de jeu pour qu'on ait peut-être vraiment envie de parler de ça."

²⁷⁴ "Je pense que ma fille joue, doit jouer sur son téléphone comme moi. Et mon fils, lui il a toujours joué, sur ordinateur mais je ne sais pas à quoi."

²⁷⁵ "Je sais pas s'il y en a beaucoup qui jouent au jeu, j'ai pas l'impression. Faudrait que je leur pose la question."

amateur plane builders to which he belongs. Although several members of the club play with flight simulators and one even visited Philippe to try out his setup, Philippe notes that it is a secondary topic of conversation among them:

It's a conversation that we'll have from time to time. It'll never be a main conversation topic, see. "Well, I tried out that one", "did you see it", "what did you think about it". Well, that's it. We'd rather talk about our planes proper, those that fly in real life.²⁷⁶

When older players talk about video games, they generally do so with one privileged interlocutor who also plays video games. Although Jacqueline knows that some of her friends play, she intentionally does not talk about video games with them: "Yes, I know a few people. We don't talk about it. It's not a part of our conversations. Not at all, not at all, not at all. Play is, it's a private and intimate matter."²⁷⁷ When older players talk about video games with others, they carefully pick their interlocutors. Besides her guildmates, Sylvie only discusses video games with her son who also plays *World of Warcraft*, even though her intensive play takes up a significant part of her everyday life. Nicole has a daughter-in-law who plays the same game, as does Christine with her cousin, and both occasionally talk about their play in this context. Dominique and Bernard are more vocal about their play, in part because of the pride they take in their son's game designer career, but they limit such exchanges to people they know well and trust.

While some older players are frustrated by the isolation that results from this situation, most embrace the invisibility of their play. Several interviewees explicitly state that they prefer playing alone rather than with others. Christophe explains that he dislikes online games because he is "fiercely individualistic", at least when it comes to video games. All interviewees play at least some of the time on their own, even when they are invested in intensive and/or social forms of play otherwise. A recurring pattern in older players' narratives is the importance of video games as an opportunity to take time on one's own, as a private, personal, and even intimate activity. Michel jokes that video games qualify as a "solitary pleasure". Jacqueline highly values this aspect of her play: "So I love playing at night. My husband likes to sleep, he goes to bed. I'm all alone with myself and I love it. The game lets you get inside your head. It makes you feel peaceful."²⁷⁸ Video game play can serve escapist purposes, particularly in relation to the challenges of old age. Sylvie, whose unemployment and low retirement pension have put into a precarious situation for the foreseeable future, enjoys the peace of mind that comes with her immersion into *World of Warcraft* and away from problematic relationships:

²⁷⁶"C'est une conversation qu'on aura une fois de temps en temps. Ça sera jamais un sujet de conversation principal, quoi. Tiens, j'ai essayé tel truc, tu l'as vu, qu'est-ce que t'en penses. Voilà, quoi, ça. On parlera plus de nos avions propres qui volent dans la réalité."

²⁷⁷"Oui, j'en connais quelques-unes. On en parle pas. Ça ne fait pas partie de nos conversations. Du tout, du tout, du tout. Le jeu c'est, c'est une affaire privée et intime."

²⁷⁸"Et alors j'adore jouer la nuit. Mon mari aime dormir, il va se coucher. Moi je suis seule avec moi-même et j'adore ça. Le jeu vous permet de rentrer en vous-même. Ça vous donne de la quiétude."

There's no anxiety, there's no worry. There's no "Ah, I must not forget to do that anymore" and "Will that work?", "How much am I going to get?", etc. Well all, all, all these issues. Even family issues, affective issues, it's the same, see.²⁷⁹

This pattern comes up throughout the literature on older adults and video games, as in the case for De Schutter *et al.*'s (2014:1181) respondent Georgette:

I feel as if I'm imprisoned and alone. I don't see a lot of people and I can't stand being alone. That's why games are very important to me. I almost play all day. It's a kind of therapy... When I'm behind my PC, I forget how alone I can be.

Older adults often characterize the isolation of their practice as a preference and a deliberate choice. In order to pursue solitary play, they have to resist two types of pressure. Firstly, older players push back against their own games' and devices' efforts to make them play with other people. Jacqueline addresses this issue regarding the games she plays on her smartphone and her online experience in general:

I don't speak to people. Internet, I'm not looking to have players that are friends. I'm not looking for friends on the Internet, not at all, not at all, I'm not interested. I don't answer at all anything that is about Send to a friend, Poke a friend, Share, Buy. Nothing. I'm not interested in it. I don't want to get into that game.²⁸⁰

Secondly, older players protect their play and their alone time from the demands of the people around them, particularly their spouses. Jacqueline explains:

He thinks I play too much, he'd rather have me talking to him all the time. But he reads a lot. And that's not the point, anyway. I want to play, I play, period. Well, we have a shared life that is solid enough that, see. But it's quite derogatory, the way he says it.²⁸¹

Older players who are comfortable with solitary play are not entirely exempt from bouts of frustration and disappointment. It becomes particularly visible within couples in which one half plays and the other does not. This configuration is relatively common among interviewees and in the ethnographic literature on older adults and video games. Older adults are sometimes driven to video games precisely because they find themselves alone in their interest for specific forms of play; video games then compensate for the lack of game partner. Several interviewees

²⁷⁹“Il n'y a plus d'angoisse, il n'y a plus d'inquiétude. Il n'y a plus de Oh la la, il ne faut plus que j'oublie de faire ça, et Est-ce que ça va marcher, Combien je vais toucher, *etcetera*. Enfin tout tout, tous ces problèmes-là. Même les problèmes familiaux, affectifs, pareil, hein.”

²⁸⁰“Je ne parle pas aux gens. Internet, je ne cherche pas à avoir des joueurs amis. Je ne cherche pas d'amis par Internet du tout du tout, ça ne m'intéresse pas. Je ne réponds pas du tout à tout ce qui est Envoyez à un ami, Faites signes à un ami, Partagez, Achetez. Rien. Ça m'intéresse pas. Je veux pas rentrer dans ce jeu-là.”

²⁸¹“Il trouve que je joue trop, il préférerait que je lui parle tout le temps. Mais il lit beaucoup. Et c'est pas la question. j'ai envie de jouer, point. Bon, on a une vie commune suffisamment forte pour que, voilà. Mais c'est assez péjoratif dans sa bouche.”

express frustration at the discrepancy between their tastes and their friends' or relatives' when it comes to play. For instance, Alain likes to play chess,

But in my family, there's no one who's interested in that kind of games. And I have to admit that the other games that the family is more into, it's going to be card games, card-based games, and I'm not, I'm not exactly a fan.²⁸²

As Nathalie concludes, “[s]o I said at least if I ever want to play I can, um, I can play against the computer and that's all good.²⁸³”

In summary, older players employ video games in diverse ways depending on their possibilities and priorities in old age. They can use the practice as a support for new sociabilities, like Sylvie who leads her *World of Warcraft* guild. They can also enrich existing relationships by playing with relatives and friends or playing the same games as them, like Chantal who followed her friends on an online quiz game. Finally, they can establish their play as a time for themselves, during which they enjoy solitude and respite from others' expectations and demands, like Jacqueline who describes video game play as an intimate experience and sets up play sessions at night in order not to be disturbed.

²⁸²“Mais dans ma famille, il n'y a personne que ça intéresse, ce genre de jeux. Et j'avoue que les autres jeux auxquels la famille adhère plus ça va être des jeux de cartes, à base de cartes, et je suis pas, je suis pas complètement fan.”

²⁸³“Donc j'ai dit au moins si jamais j'ai envie je peux jouer, euh, je peux jouer contre l'ordi et voilà c'est très bien.”

Conclusion

Older adults have to reorganize their life, and particularly their everyday life, in reaction to the end of the working life. In order to make this change into a transition rather than an interruption, older adults intensify pre-existing activities or develop new ones, renegotiate their relationships with others, and reinvest the domestic space in various ways. Through time management, older adults manage expectations and demands but also maintain a sense of identity and continuity in this challenging stage of the life course.

Through its incorporation into everyday life, video game play supports and sustains time sovereignty in old age. Digital play is versatile, sometimes facilitating moments of idleness and rest, sometimes easing the slow passage of time, and sometimes fostering intense activity and sociability. Older adults find in video game play a leisure activity that easily fits into the tempo of old age. It contributes to structuring life, either as a central pursuit or a side activity. Older adults' management of their sociability also find an outlet in video game play. Digital play occasionally creates opportunities to spend time with others. Nonetheless, the importance of video game play as a way to preserve time for oneself is a guiding thread throughout the observations and interviews.

An analysis of video game play through the prism of time calls attention to the inventive ways in which older adults exert agency. Older players engage in strategic uses of leisure and technology to build an experience of old age that works for them. While earlier chapters emphasized the constrained environment in which older adults encounter video games, the final chapter highlights that the social and cultural experience of old age is not merely about social exclusion, undesirable identities, and limited material resources. Old age triggers new challenges and limitations, but also new possibilities, from the spectacular increase in free time and the end of formal work to the paradoxical liberation that stems from older adults' marginal social position. Older individuals creatively navigate these complex circumstances, attentive to the social roles and responsibilities that they are expected (and want) to fulfill, but also relishing old age's potential as a time of play and freedom.

CONCLUSION. AGE MATTERS

“There’s nothing going on”. On the car ride to a workshop, as I express my disappointment about missing one of the workshops I intended to visit, the *Golden-Age Games* local coordinator tells me that I haven’t missed anything. The volunteers sitting in the back nod vigorously and explain that the participants basically play on their own, leaving volunteers with nothing to do. “You’d be disappointed”, “you’ll have nothing to observe”, because “it’s less interesting” than the other workshops I’ve visited. As a matter of fact, I would very much like to see such a workshop, but I don’t see the point of contradicting them given that I won’t be able to attend it in any case. This interaction nonetheless leaves me wondering; what exactly do we want from older adults who play video games?

Older video game players face complex and occasionally contradictory expectations. When older adults are skilled enough to play on their own, their lack of interaction with volunteers is a disappointment. When they are passionate about their play, shouting in glee when they land a throw and swearing when they lose, they spoil the friendly atmosphere of the workshops and scare other players. When they have strong preferences regarding what they want to play and refuse other activities, they are stubborn and making everyone’s job more difficult. *Golden-Age Games* organizers are not the only ones with an opinion on the proper way to play video games in old age. Medical professionals prefer older adults to play games that are cognitively stimulating or physically exerting, ideally under the supervision of a nurse. Older players themselves distinguish between acceptable and dangerous practices, particularly regarding addiction. Their friends or relatives would prefer older adults not to play too much. Even I found myself valuing certain play styles over others. Critical of the gamer culture but still familiar with its hierarchies, I was particularly thrilled about recruiting individuals who play several hours a day in a competitive setting than players who pick up their tablet once in a while to play *Solitaire* or *Scrabble*.

Older video game players cannot win. There are too many expectations and representations around their engagement with leisure and technology; they cannot possibly fulfill them all. This puts older players in a precarious position, which in turn shapes their play. On one hand, their domestication of video games is complicated by the conflicting representations of technology and aging, exclusive gaming cultures, and restrictive design choices, among other elements. In response, many older adults hide or disparage their play. They are extremely self-aware about their performance or legitimacy as video game players. They also struggle to find other players or communities that could support their play. On the other hand, older adults find ways to domesticate video games and fit them into their lives. This play supports their pursuit of a comfortable old age: it lets them reclaim a positive identity in old age, adapt enjoyable activities that have become less accessible, and rearrange an unsettled everyday life. This is the main

conclusion of my research: older adults' video game play is embedded in normative conflicts about the proper way to age, but also in individual strategies to live a comfortable old age amidst these conflicts.

It is in that sense that old age shapes video game play. Older adults engage with digital play on their own terms, according to their preferences, embodied experience of aging, past, and interests; but also in response to the context of old age, its challenges and possibilities. This results in play practices that reflect the experience of old age, not in a deterministic or biological sense, as the diversity of older adults' play illustrates, but in a social and cultural sense. The interplay of representations, power relations, and material conditions gives rise to a distinctive (although not monolithic) experience of video game play in old age.

The first chapter of this thesis notes that the conflicting images of play (as children's domain), video games (as youthful but deviant), and old age (as hostile to new technology) define video game play as an incongruous pastime for older adults. In response, they express discomfort and ambivalence toward their play. The second chapter highlights that the emergence of the silver gamer discourse provides positive meanings for older adults' play, but these meanings are quite restrictive. As a result, older adults find themselves constrained rather than liberated by the silver gamer figure. The third chapter considers older adults' dismissal of the silver gamer discourse, which alters their practices and relationships with video games. The fourth chapter argues that they find resources in video games, or rather make them into resources that support their own understanding and aspirations regarding old age. Through play, they negotiate with the expectations and representations of aging, distancing themselves from less desirable images of aging and protecting their self-worth. The fifth chapter contends that older adults occupy a marginal position in gaming cultures and spaces. This position leaves its mark on their play, as older adults' play tends to be discreet, self-aware, and stable over time, with rare forays outside of prevailing genres (puzzles, word and number games, and digital versions of popular board and card games). This does not prevent older adults from building diverse and creative relationships with video games at the interface between their inclinations and (age-related but also other) constraints. The sixth chapter shows that digital play has a place in older adults' experience of time. In video games, they find an everyday companion, a reliable solution to boredom and the slow passage of time, a respite from a busy life, and, more often than not, a precious opportunity to enjoy some time on their own.

The specificity of older adults' video game play illustrates that age matters in digital play. Just like other social positions and identities such as gender and race (Gray 2014; Shaw 2015), age shapes individuals' experience of video games, from the genres and games that they play to the sociabilities they establish around their practices. Players' age matters because it constitutes a distinctive social position and stage in the life course. As such, it is associated with specific institutions and representations that facilitate some forms of play and complicate others. Additionally, older adults' play highlights that players' past experiences, particularly with technology and leisure, affect their engagement with video games. This has implications for play and game studies in general, calling attention to the importance of biography and the life

course in players' practices. Video game play is neither the exclusive domain of children and teenagers nor an experience that transcends the boundaries of age and the life course.

Furthermore, because video game play in old age is unexpected and challenging, it brings into view the contemporary experience of old age with particular acuity. In an "age-hostile culture", old age is a stigmatized and undesirable identity associated with decline and the loss of personhood (Schwaiger 2006). From a biopolitical perspective, visible aging signifies a personal and moral failure to maintain oneself and resist decline. Old age is all the more challenging that this stage of the life course is associated with the institution of retirement. This symbolical and material exclusion from the workforce disrupts existing social roles and identities and confines older adults into dedicated spaces (such as senior clubs, nursing homes, or volunteering opportunities geared towards retirees). Old age pushes individuals to a social and economic periphery, a situation that can be freeing as well as alienating.

This fosters a distinct experience of the social world, a sense of being out of step and not belonging that leads Dowd (1986), inspired by Margaret Mead's reflections on aging, to describe older adults as "strangers" and "immigrants in time". Old age is particularly susceptible to experiences of exclusion and frustration as well as adaptation and resistance. This ambivalent position is well-illustrated by the literature on aging and play, for instance in Barrett and Naiman-Sessions' (2016) study of the Red Hat Society and its members' playful performance of girlhood in old age, and in the literature on aging and technology, for instance in Joyce and Loe's (2010) research on "technogenarians" who creatively adapt to technological constraints. Video game play sheds light on the strategic and agentive work that older adults conduct to set up a desirable identity and comfortable experience of old age.

A core element of this process pertains to time insofar as older adults encounter (or at least are imagined to encounter) a disturbing anomaly in a capitalist society: life without work. The experience of old age is marked by a distinct relationship with time and labour that situates them at the margins of a society organized around formal work (Kohli 1988). A set of meanings, practices, and values emerges from this peripheral position and finds a privileged expression in leisure. In this context, video game play becomes particularly meaningful in old age as a relationship with time. Throughout this study of video game play in old age, three types of relationship with time stand out. I argue that these experiences of time are characteristic of old age itself, visible in video game play but relevant outside of it as well.

The first of these modalities is "wasted time": video games come to symbolize a time that could be better (that is, more productively) spent elsewhere. This constitutes a source of anxiety for many players who perceive video games as a seductive, even addictive activity that could take their own time away from them. In old age, time is made precious by the freedom of retirement but also by the perspective of the fourth age. Wasting time can however also be a form of quiet resistance against expectations of continued productivity such as volunteering or (grand)childcare. A second modality, "invested time", is a direct reaction to fears about wasting time in old age. In a context in which the discourse of "successful aging" prevails, older adults

are aware of the expectation that they should take care of themselves to avoid weighing on others' time and resources (Allain and Marshall 2017). Video games represent an opportunity to optimally use time by investing it in activities that are productive and/or anti-aging. By selectively referencing the silver gamer figure, older adults are able to frame video game play as a virtuous endeavour that preserves their cognitive and physical health, social participation, and digital literacy. A third modality transcends the binary of useless/useful time and associates video games with "time for myself". It aligns with a representation of aging as a respite and reward from a life spent working and caring for others (Repetti 2015). It also reflects a model of comfortable aging that is much more widespread among older adults than what dominant representations of aging suggest (Loe 2010). In the form of *Candy Crush* sessions in the kitchen while the roast is cooking or hours-long *World of Warcraft* raids every night, video games become a precious and valued moment away from the obligations of everyday life: a break, a ritual, a space of one's own.

Finally, the study of older adults' digital play lays the groundwork for a cultural theory of old age. Throughout this research, I have argued that the circumstances associated with old age shape a distinctive experience of video game play. This same reasoning could conceivably be expanded beyond digital play and applied to other objects or practices. The interaction of successful aging, the institution of retirement, and long biographies (among other elements) generate a specific social and cultural environment in old age. This fosters a collective and distinctive experience for the individuals who belong, or rather are assigned, to this age group. The shared set of meanings, norms, and material manifestations associated with a specific position in the life course is evocative of other age-related cultures such as children's cultures.

Scholars of childhood, from sociologists to folklorists, have long expressed interest in the many cultures of childhood: consumer cultures and the production of media for/about children, but also the autonomous peer cultures of children (Corsaro 1997). Incidentally, the "peer cultures" developed by children for themselves and on their own (for instance with their classmates or neighbours) often revolve around play (Corsaro 1985). Playful activities let children appropriate and develop cultural meanings of their own in the constraining context of their subaltern position in society (James and Prout 1997). Sutton-Smith (1997) considers children's play and folklore as a space in which children's culture emerges. In Sutton-Smith's view, children's play reflects both the lack of power associated with children's social status and the strategies that children devise to resist or subvert age-related norms and expectations. The description is reminiscent of older adults' digital play, although the comparison has its limits given the very different cultural meanings of childhood and old age. Nonetheless, it points to the fact that cultural theory has much to contribute to the study of age groups, and play is a stimulating starting point in that regard. Moreover, age studies scholars have called attention to the existence of spaces primarily or exclusively occupied by older adults and the emergence of age-specific experiences within these spaces. Katz (2009) conceptualizes such sites as elderscapes and even talks of "retirement cultures" in his study on retirement communities in Florida. Researchers who investigate leisure in old age make similar observations hinting at the existence of ageing subcultures, for instance in communities of seniors involved in running,

dancing, or weaving (Tulle 2008; Schwaiger 2011; Tremblay Lamontagne 2018). Drawing on these studies as well as my own results, my research makes a comprehensive argument for a study of old age as a culture.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Tables

Table 1. Methodological overview of the interviews conducted with older adults who play video games at home

Respondent	Date	Modality	Duration
Jacqueline	22/10/19	at the respondent's daughter's home	01:38:00
Alain	29/10/19	on the phone (at home)	01:40:00
Martine	19-20/11/2019	at the respondent's home	03:30:00
Isabelle	18/03/20	on the phone (at home)	01:20:00
Nathalie	18/03/20	on the phone (workplace)	00:59:00
Sylvie	03/04/20	Discord	01:44:00
Philippe	29/05/20	on the phone (at home)	01:16:00
Michel	08/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:41:00
Chantal	10/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:04:00
Christophe	11/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:17:00
Dominique and Bernard	16/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:09:00
Yvette	19/06/20	on Facebook live chat	01:22:00
Marie	29/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:50:00
Nicole	30/06/20	on the phone (at home)	01:01:00
Christine	03/07/20	on the phone (at home)	01:12:00

Table 2. Interviewees' profiles

Respondent	Gender	Age	Place of residence	Education	Career	Family Status	Work Status	Volunteering
Jacqueline	woman	84	near Royan (Nouvelle-Aquitaine)	university (law)	stay-at-home mother; later HR professional	divorced, married; adult children; grandchildren	retired	no
Alain	man	66	near La Rochelle (Nouvelle-Aquitaine)	vocational training (teaching); later vocational training (computer sciences)	teacher; entrepreneur (data processing); store manager (food industry; culture); musician; computer instructor	divorced, married; adult children	retired	yes (in computer training)
Martine	woman	75	near Auray (Bretagne)	art school (fine arts); later vocational training (alternative medicine) (interrupted)	secretary (construction industry); business coach	widow; adult children; grandchildren	retired	no
Isabelle	woman	60	Paris (Île-de-France)	university degree (statistics)	financial professional	divorced, in a relationship; adult children; grandchildren	partly retired; freelance work	yes (in commercial arbitration)
Nathalie	woman	67	Paris (Île-de-France)	high school degree; later vocational training (home care)	stay-at-home mother; secretary (accounting); home carer for the elderly	separated, in a relationship; adult children	working	no
Sylvie	woman	65	Tarn (Occitanie)	vocational training (secretary)	secretary; factory worker; gardener; childminder	divorced; adult children	unemployed; applied for retirement	no
Philippe	man	64	Brest (Bretagne)	technical education (electronics)	engineer (electronics)	single	retired	no

Table 2 (cont.) Interviewees' profiles

Michel	man	70	La-Rochesur-Yon (Nouvelle-Aquitaine)	vocational training (teaching)	head teacher	divorced, married; adult children	retired	yes (in counseling and education)
Chantal	woman	66	Saint-Denis (Île-de-France)	university (law)	municipal official	married; adult children; grandchild	retired	yes (in social justice)
Christophe	man	68	Near Toulon (Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur)	vocational training (optician)	optician	divorced; adult children; grandchild	retired	no
Dominique	woman	65	Narbonne (Occitanie)	high school degree; later university (psychology)	secretary; entrepreneur (marketing); journalist; educational support	married; adult child	working part-time	no
Bernard	man	77	Narbonne (Occitanie)	art school (architecture); later higher education (urbanism)	architect; film producer; consultant; writer	divorced, married; adult children; grandchildren	retired	yes (in education)
Yvette	woman	86	Paris (Île-de-France)	high school degree; later vocational training (teacher)	stay-at-home mother; teacher	widowed; adult child; grandchildren	retired	no
Marie	woman	81	Lille (Hauts-de-France)	high school degree; later vocational training (medical profession) (interrupted)	stay-at-home mother; later teacher	divorced; widowed; adult children	retired	yes (in leisure)
Nicole	woman	69	near Orléans (Centre-Val-de-Loire)	high school degree	factory worker; civil servant (technical profession)	married; adult children; grandchildren	retired	no
Christine	woman	60	near Bourges (Centre-Val-de-Loire)	university (economics)	teacher	single	working; applied for retirement	no

Table 3. Interviewees' video game play: game genres and titles

Respondent	Mainly plays	Also plays	Has played	Started playing
Jacqueline	<i>Tetris</i> , <i>Scrabble</i> , mah jong, word games on PC		mah jong on PC	In the 1990s with <i>Tetris</i> on PC
Alain	<i>Forge of Empires</i> (online strategy game) on PC	<i>Flight Simulator</i> , <i>Flight Gears</i> , <i>Explane</i> (flight simulators), <i>War Zone</i> (wargame) on PC; old games on emulators (like <i>Icariam</i>) on PC; <i>Angry Birds</i> on smart TV; <i>Pinklink</i> (platform game) on smartphone; console games (in the 1990s)	<i>Pong</i> , platform games, and puzzle games on PC	In the 1980s with pirated copies of <i>Pong</i> on the computer
Martine	<i>Zelda: Breath of the Wild</i> (adventure game) on Nintendo Switch	<i>Final Fantasy VIII</i> (Japanese role play game) on Nintendo Switch; <i>Grim Tales</i> and <i>Dark Parables</i> (hidden object games) on the tablet; match-3 games on the tablet	all <i>Zelda</i> games since the 1990s; <i>Harry Potter</i> (role play game) on PC; <i>FireEmblem</i> (adventure game) on the GameCube	In 1992 with <i>Zelda: Link to the Past</i> (adventure game) on SuperNES
Isabelle	<i>Cooking Fever</i> (management game) on smartphone	<i>Scrabble</i> on tablet	<i>Donkey Kong</i> on a portable console; adventure games on an IBM computer	in the 1990s with <i>Donkey Kong</i> on a portable console (Super Nintendo perhaps)
Nathalie	<i>Pro des Mots</i> (word game), <i>Capitales du Monde</i> (quizz), <i>Scrabble</i> on smartphone	crosswords and puzzle games on smartphone		In 2015 with <i>Scrabble</i> on smartphone
Sylvie	<i>World of Warcraft</i> (massive multiplayer online role play game) on PC	<i>Panic Room</i> , <i>Maison des Secrets...</i> (hidden object games and point'n'clicks) on PC	<i>Star Wars: The Old Republic</i> , <i>King Wars 2</i> , <i>The Thalos Principle</i> , <i>Rift</i> , <i>Torchlight...</i> (online roleplaying and adventure games) on PC;	Around 2009 with <i>World of Warcraft</i> on PC
Philippe	<i>Flight Simulator</i> on PC	<i>Digital Combat Simulator</i> (flight simulator) on PC	earlier versions of Microsoft's <i>Flight Simulator</i> on PC	In 2002 with a flight simulator
Michel	250+ <i>Solitaire</i> (patience games) on Mac	various console games	other <i>Solitaire</i> variations	In the 1990s with platform games on Mac
Chantal	<i>Ruzzle</i> (competitive word game) and <i>DuelQuizz</i> (online quizz game) on smartphone and tablet		<i>Solitaire</i>	In the 2000s with <i>Solitaire</i> on the computer
Christophe	<i>Candy Crush</i> (match-3), puzzle games, and sudokus on smartphone		racing games, games preinstalled on the computer	In the 1990s with his children's games on PC
Dominique	<i>Dominion</i> (card building) on tablet; <i>Reversi</i> (strategy board game), <i>Angry Birds 2</i> (platform game), <i>Scrabble</i> , <i>Solitaire...</i> on smartphone	<i>DoodleJump</i> , <i>Labyrinthe</i> (platform games), <i>TableTennis...</i> on smartphone	<i>Pong</i> , <i>Doom</i> (first person shooter), platform and strategy games on PC; hangman, <i>Tiny Wings...</i> on the tablet; various console games	In the 1990s with a <i>Mario</i> game on console

Table 3 (cont.) Interviewees' video game play: game genres and titles

Bernard	<i>Dominion</i> on tablet	Scrabble and other patience games on smartphone; a flight simulator on PC	<i>Pong</i> , <i>Doom</i> (first person shooter), platform and strategy games on PC; hangman, <i>Tiny Wings...</i> on the tablet; various console games	In the 1990s with a <i>Mario</i> game on console
Yvette	sudokus on tablet	sudokus on PC		In the late 2010s with sudokus on the tablet
Marie	<i>Candy Crush</i> (match-3) on tablet		<i>Jardin des Mots</i> (word game) on tablet	Around 2015 with <i>Candy Crush</i> on tablet
Nicole	<i>Homescapes</i> (interior decorator simulator) on smartphone	<i>Chez Moi</i> (interior decorator simulator) on smartphone; mah jong, Solitaire, Stand O' Food on PC	<i>Chuzzle</i> (match-3), <i>2048</i> (number/puzzle game), <i>Tetris</i> , <i>Candy Crush</i> on smartphone; hidden objects and point'n'clicks on PC	In the 2000s with point'n'clicks on PC
Christine	<i>Gummy Drop</i> (match-3) on smartphone		<i>Candy Crush</i> (match-3) on smartphone and tablet	In the 2000s with <i>Solitaire</i> on the computer

Table 4. Interviewees' video game play: material configuration

Respondent	What device?	How often?	For how long?	Where?	With whom?
Christine	smartphone	every day, sometimes several times a day	short sessions (under a half-hour),	at home (anywhere), on the commuter train, sitting in her garden	alone; talks about it with a cousin
Nicole	computer, smartphone	almost every day, several times a day	short sessions (max. 10 minutes)	at home (in the kitchen, living room, bedroom)	alone; talks about it with a daughter-in-law
Martine	Nintendo Switch console; tablet; smartphone	every day, several times a day	several hours a day	at home (on her living room's TV)	alone; sometimes has a young neighbour or her grandson coming over to play; tries to get in touch with gamer groups
Isabelle	smartphone	every day, several times a day	short sessions	at home (in her office or on her living room's TV), on the bus	alone; does not talk about it with anyone
Nathalie	smartphone	at least once a week	short to medium sessions (between a few minutes and an hour)	in the workplace (in her room, in her employers' house) or at home	alone; sometimes talks about it with her daughter
Sylvie	custom gaming PC	every day, several times a day	an hour in the morning and several hours every evening	at home (in her living room)	with her guild (in-game and on social media); talks about it with her son
Philippe	computer with VR equipment	sometimes every day and sometimes not at all for several weeks	short and intermediate sessions (max. an hour)	at home (in the attic)	alone; talks about it with a friend, other plane builders, and on online forums for flight simulators
Michel	computer	every day	short sessions (max. Thirty minutes)	at home (in his office)	usually alone, but plays with his daughter and son-in-law when they visit; rarely talks about it
Chantal	smartphone and tablet	every day, several times a day	short sessions (about 10 minutes)	at home (in her living room)	online, with a group of regulars (and before that with her girlfriends); does not talk about it
Christophe	smartphone	regularly but not every day, with periods of intense play	short sessions during the day and/or long sessions at night	at home (in his living room, kitchen, bedroom)	alone; does not talk about it with anyone
Jacqueline	computer	regularly but not every day, several times a day	short sessions (in total about three hours a day)	at home (in her living room)	alone; does not talk about it with anyone

Table 4 (cont.) Interviewees' video game play: material configuration

Alain	computer, smartphone, console	every day	intermediate sessions (an hour or more)	at home (in his "workshop" where he stores all his tech devices)	online with strangers; with his guild (<i>Forge of Empires</i>); with his daughter (9yo); talks about it with fellow players
Dominique	tablet	regularly but not every day	intermediate sessions (about an hour) and short sessions	at home (in the kitchen)	with her spouse, sometimes with her son when he visits; talks about it with her son
Bernard	tablet	regularly but not every day	intermediate sessions (about an hour)	at home (in the office)	with his spouse, sometimes with her son when he visits; talks about it with his son
Marie	tablet	every day, several times a day	short sessions (about fifteen minutes)	at home (in her living room)	alone; rarely talks about it with her son
Yvette	tablet, computer	every day, sometimes twice a day	intermediate sessions (about an hour)	at home (in her living room)	alone; rarely talks about it

Table 5. Methodological overview of the observations conducted in video game workshops for older adults

Workshop	Date	Region	Context	Host institution
1	30/04/19	Centre-Val-de-Loire	rural town	EHPAD
2	30/04/19	Centre-Val-de-Loire	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	résidence-autonomie
3	03/04/19	Normandie	residential neighbourhood of a large city	EHPAD
4	04/04/19	Normandie	recently developed neighbourhood of a large city	EHPAD
5	10/04/19	Normandie	residential suburb of a large city	EHPAD
6	11/04/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	city centre of a mountain town	EHPAD
7	12/04/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	historic centre of a mid-size city	EHPAD
8	02/05/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	historic centre of a mid-size city	EHPAD
9	02/05/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	historic centre of a large city	EHPAD
10	03/05/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	agricultural countryside	EHPAD
11	25/04/19	Pays de la Loire	residential neighbourhood of a rural town	résidence-autonomie
12	25/04/19	Pays de la Loire	city centre of a rural town	résidence-autonomie
13	25/04/19	Pays de la Loire	city centre of a rural town	senior centre
14	25/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	neighbourhood centre
15	04/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	outskirts of a midsize city	résidence-autonomie
16	04/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	outskirts of a midsize city	résidence-autonomie
17	20/03/19	Bretagne	residential suburb of a midsize city	résidence-autonomie
18	11/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	outskirts of a midsize city	EHPAD
19	11/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	city centre of a midsize city	EHPAD
20	05/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	rural town	neighbourhood centre
21	06/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	suburbs of a large city	EHPAD
22	06/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	rural town	neighbourhood centre
23	11/03/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	residential neighbourhood of a large city	résidence-autonomie
24	12/04/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	outskirts of a large city	résidence-autonomie
25	21/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	outskirts of a large city	résidence-autonomie
26	18/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	neighbourhood centre
27	17/04/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	EHPAD
28	26/03/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	outskirts of a mid-size city	EHPAD
29	26/03/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	EHPAD
30	27/03/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	residential neighbourhood of a mid-size city	EHPAD

Table 6. Methodological overview of the additional observations related to video game workshops for older adults

Observation	Date	Region	Content
1	30/04/19	Centre-Val-de-Loire	informal interview with a local coordinator
2	30/04/19	Centre-Val-de-Loire	informal interview with local coordinators
3	02/05/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	informal interview with a local coordinator
4	03/05/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	informal interview with volunteers
5	24/04/19	Pays-de-la-Loire	informal interview with local coordinators and volunteers
6	24/04/19	Pays-de-la-Loire	local tournament
7	25/04/19	Pays-de-la-Loire	informal interview with local coordinators and volunteers
8	04/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	informal interview with a local coordinator
9	05/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	informal interview with a local coordinator
10	05/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	local tournament
11	11/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	informal interview with local coordinators
12	26-30/10/19	Île-de-France	on the association's booth at a video game convention
13	31/10/19	Île-de-France	showcase competition
14	02/04/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	local tournament
15	06/02/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	informal interview with a local coordinator
16	20/04/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	regional tournament
17	14/05/19	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	informal interview with a representative of a partner institution of the association
18	26/03/19	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	informal interview with a local coordinator and volunteers

Table 7. Observations in video game workshops for older adults: attendance

Workshop	Nb. of participants	Nb. of volunteers	Nb. of local coordinators	Nb. of leisure supervisors
1	9	3	1	1
2	3	2	1	0
3	5	4	0	1
4	6	3	1	1
5	6	3	0	1
6	3	3	0	1
7	5	3	0	0
8	0	3	0	0
9	7	4	0	1
10	11	4	0	1
11	4	5	2	1
12	2	3	0	0
13	4	4	2	0
14	6	3	0	0
15	3	3	1	1
16	8	3	0	1
17	11	3	0	1
18	5	2	0	1
19	2	1	0	1
20	8	3	0	0
21	13	3	0	1
22	4	4	0	0
23	5	2	0	2
24	6	2	0	1
25	4	3	0	0
26	4	3	0	0
27	10	4	1	1
28	4	2	1	1
29	5	3	1	1
30	9	3	0	1

Table 8. Observations in video game workshops for older adults: activities

Workshop	Wii games	Tablet games	Demonstration of uses/devices	Tech assistance	Other leisure activities (digital)	Other games (not digital)	Other activities
1			virtual visit of a museum				
2	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
3	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
4	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
5	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
6	<i>WiiBowling</i>					<i>Scrabble</i>	
7	<i>WiiBowling</i>	mémory					drawing
8							
9	<i>WiiBowling</i>	quizz			music (on the tablet)	construction/ board game (<i>Villa Paletti</i>) and <i>Scrabble</i>	
10			Web browsing to find information about residents' interests and learning how to load photos on the computer		karaoke (on a special device called "Borne Mélo")		
11		<i>Scrabble</i> and a cross-and-circle game ("petits chevaux")				checkers	
12		<i>Battleship</i> and shufflepuck					
13	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
14	<i>WiiBowling</i>			issues with participants' smartphones and tablets (caller ID and Facebook Messenger)			
15	<i>WiiBowling</i>	word search grid					
16	<i>WiiBowling</i>	mah jong and <i>Triominos</i>					
17	<i>WiiBowling</i>						
18	<i>WiiBowling</i>						arts and crafts (paper figures)
19			GoogleEarth (based on residents' life stories)				
20	<i>WiiBowling</i>		GoogleMaps	participants ask for help with their computers	watching videos and listening to music (on tablets)		
21	<i>WiiBowling</i>	quizz (<i>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire</i>)	Web browsing to find information about residents' interests	issues with using online services (insurance)			
22	<i>WiiBowling</i> and <i>WiiBasketball</i>			issues with a participant's tablet (using GoogleMaps)			
23	<i>WiiBowling</i>	casual platform game					

Table 8 (cont.) Observations in video game workshops for older adults: activities

21	<i>WiiBowling</i>	quizz (<i>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire</i>)	Web browsing to find information about residents' interests	issues with using online services (insurance)			
22	<i>WiiBowling</i> and <i>WiiBasketball</i>			issues with a participant's tablet (using GoogleMaps)			
23	<i>WiiBowling</i>	casual platform game					
24	<i>WiiBowling</i>	card game (tarot) and word games	demonstration of the tablet's possible uses (Web browsing)	issues with a participant's smartphone (lost password)	playing the virtual piano (on a tablet)		
25		<i>Scrabble</i> and memory	demonstration of the tablet's possible uses (Web browsing and apps)	issues with a participant's tablet	watching videos and showing pictures (on participants' tablets)		
26	<i>WiiBowling</i>			issues with a participant's smartphone and laptop			
27	<i>WiiBowling</i>	word games (crosswords and word search grids)					
28	<i>WiiBowling</i>	hangman					
29		memory					nail art; cooking
30	<i>WiiBowling</i>	memory, word search grids, and hangman	demonstration of the tablet's possible uses (apps)				

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

This is the interview guide as submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee.

Introduction

Je suis Gabrielle Lavenir, et j'étudie les loisirs des personnes âgées pour ma thèse. Nous allons lire ensemble le formulaire de consentement. N'hésitez pas à poser des questions sur le travail de recherche, la méthode de l'enquête, et les garanties de confidentialité.

Je vais d'abord vous poser des questions générales sur votre trajectoire de vie. Ces questions me permettent de mieux contextualiser les questions suivantes, sur la place des loisirs et du jeu dans votre vie.

1. Biographical Interview

This first section aims to allow the participant to talk about their life freely and at-length. The first questions will be intentionally vague in order to let the participant direct the interview. The interviewer will ask some or all of the follow-up questions if the participant hasn't answered them spontaneously. The interviewer will also ask tailored follow-up questions based on the participant's previous answers (e.g. if the participant mentions a hobby, travels, involvement in an association, etc).

Parlez-moi de vous. Depuis combien de temps vivez-vous dans cette ville ? Où habitez-vous, avant ?

Parlez-moi de votre vie professionnelle. Avez-vous eu un emploi ? Dans quels domaines avez-vous travaillé ? Quel était le dernier emploi que vous avez occupé ? Est-ce que vous travaillez en ce moment ?

[Si le participant mentionne des études ou une formation] Pouvez-vous m'en parler ?

Parlez-moi de votre famille.

Parlez-moi de votre quartier.

Maintenant, nous allons parler de votre vie au cours des dix dernières années. Y a-t-il eu des événements importants, et si oui lesquels ? Y a-t-il eu des changements, et si oui lesquels ?

Parlez-moi de vos activités de loisirs. Quand avez-vous eu du temps libre, au cours de votre vie ?

Quelles activités avez-vous eues ? Avec qui (seul.e, avec la famille, les ami.es, les collègues, etc) ?

2. On Leisure, Play, Video Games in Old Age

a) Leisure

Parlez-moi de ce que vous faites dans votre temps libre aujourd'hui.

[The following questions are designed as follow-up questions to the first one; the interviewer will ask none, some, or all of those in order to help the participant with their answer]

Cette année, avez-vous :

- regardé la télévision ? Quoi, et quand ?
- lu des livres ?
- écouté la radio ?
- écouté de la musique ? A la radio, la télévision, sur un CD ? En concert ?
- regardé un film ? Au cinéma, diffusé à la télévision, sur VHS ou DVD ?
- lu un journal ? Un magazine ?
- allé dans un musée, un monument, un lieu patrimonial ou culturel ?

Avez-vous une pratique artistique ? Avez-vous fait de la musique, de la peinture, de la photographie ?

Avez-vous eu une pratique sportive ?

Est-ce que vous rencontrez régulièrement des gens ? Est-ce que vous êtes membre d'une association ? Est-ce que vous fréquentez une maison de quartier, un club senior ?

Suivez-vous une formation, des cours, des conférences ?

Avez-vous un hobby, une passion ?

b) Leisure-Related Technological Equipment

Parlez-moi des objets technologiques que vous possédez.

Possédez-vous une télévision ? Une radio ? Une chaîne hi-fi ? Un téléphone ?
Possédez-vous un ordinateur ? Une tablette ? Une console ? Un smartphone ?

Depuis quand ? Que faites-vous avec ? Si vous n'en possédez pas, y avez-vous accès (en bibliothèque, chez quelqu'un d'autre, etc) ?

c) Play

Parlez-moi de la place du jeu dans votre vie. Procédons chronologiquement : jouiez-vous quand vous étiez enfant ? Jeune ? Adulte ? Si oui, à quoi et quand ?

Pouvez-vous me raconter un souvenir lié au jeu ?

[Si le participant.e mentionne avoir élevé des enfants ou avoir des enfants dans leur famille]
A quels jeux avez-vous vu vos enfants jouer ? Avez-vous joué avec vos enfants, si oui à quoi, à quel âge, à quels moments ?

Maintenant, nous allons parler de votre vie quotidienne actuelle. Y a-t-il des jeux auxquels vous jouez ? Auxquels vous regardez d'autres gens jouer ?
Par exemple : des jeux de cartes, de société, d'échecs, de dames.

A quelle fréquence jouez-vous ? A quels moments de la journée ? Avec qui ?

Où jouez-vous ?

d) Video Games

Jouez-vous à des jeux vidéo ?

Jouez-vous à des jeux sur ordinateur, tablette, téléphone, console ?

Lesquels ? Depuis quand ? A quelle fréquence ? Où ?

Connaissez-vous des gens qui jouent à ces jeux ?

Connaissez-vous des jeux ? Pouvez-vous me les décrire ?

Quand avez-vous entendu parler de jeux vidéo pour la dernière fois ?

Pouvez-vous me raconter un souvenir dans lesquels les jeux vidéo jouent un rôle ?

[If the participant does play] Accepteriez-vous de me montrer le jeu auquel vous jouer ? De faire une partie devant moi ?