Why the video game industry is making a big mistake by ignoring older adults

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In April, AARP held its first Games Summit at its headquarters in Washington D.C., and for many people outside the video game industry, the event might seem like a head-scratcher. An organization focused on

advocating for people in the 50-plus demographic talking about video games, a medium typically thought to be for younger people?

But, for AARP—and the games industry—holding the summit actually makes perfect sense. Almost half of people aged 50 and older play video games, according to a [recent report](#) from AARP, and almost half of those people said they play daily. And this isn't an insignificant piece of the gaming audience.

According to AARP, there are more than 52 million people over the age of 50 playing video games, which accounts for almost a quarter of all players in the U.S. when cross-checked with numbers from the Entertainment Software Association.

However, the games industry still routinely ignores or fails to design games with older adults in mind, says Bob De Schutter, a game designer and associate professor at Northeastern University. The majority of players, 38%, are between 18 and 34 years old, but that doesn't mean older adults aren't playing the latest Zelda game and getting something meaningful out of it.

"If you look at all the literature that's out there on games, games are how we learn … and all of a sudden once you're 16, you need to stop doing that?" De Schutter says. "Do you feel when you're 30 you know everything you need to know? Do you feel when you're 40 that you've met everyone there is to know? Do you feel when you're 50 that the world stopped turning? Of course not. That's what games really do for us."

Older adults are already playing games and, importantly for the industry, spending lots of money on them too. According to a 2019 report from AARP, players who were 50 years old or more spent $3.5 billion on video games in the first half of 2019 alone. Although it's a fraction of

the $35.4 billion in U.S. games revenue for that year, it's an area of potential for an industry obsessed with growth.

De Schutter called the AARP Games Summit, which he presented at, a "historical milestone" for the conversation around older adults in games but acknowledges there is still work to do.

Even now, when people inside or outside the games industry talk about games for players who are 50 years or older, they limit it to health and brain games, De Schutter says. But the majority of older adults are playing popular mobile games, puzzle games and other kinds of "casual" games that are typically more accessible and that players of all ages flock to.

De Schutter says there is also a smaller portion of older adults who enjoy playing first-person shooters and action games. The problem isn't that older adults aren't interested in these games from 50+ players; it's that there are significant accessibility challenges that make it hard for them to enjoy these games in the first place.

Controls can be complex and tutorials that are meant to onboard new players can be unintuitive. In recent years, major strides have been taken by some of the biggest names in the industry to make games more accessible, but there is still work to be done, De Schutter says.

The content of many AAA games also doesn't necessarily appeal to an older audience. Many of the industry's biggest games like "Call of Duty" and "Assassin's Creed" are rated M for "mature," but don't necessarily fully explore what it means to provide a mature experience outside of violence and profanity.

"They want these types of experiences, but at the same time everything is from a power fantasy that is a very juvenile power fantasy too," De

Schutter says.

Celia Pearce, a professor of games design at Northeastern, says the issue goes back to what kinds of games are being created and who is in the room when those decisions are being made.

"The game industry had and maintains a constructed idea of the player that's a self-fulfilling prophecy," Pearce says. "They go, 'Young guys play games,' and then they make games for young guys and then guess who plays the games they make?"

There are also tangible benefits of getting more older adults involved in gaming, Pearce says.

"There's an epidemic of loneliness that's particularly bad among older adults, and one of the things we're looking at is creating social games for older adults," Pearce says.

How does the industry start to make games more accessible for players over the age of 50?

"The way the industry fixes this is by having inclusive development teams that involve older players in ideation, that bring older players in to brainstorm with them and see what they're genuinely interested in and build their design around a broader demographic than just younger audiences," De Schutter says.

Another fix is addressing the underrepresentation of older adults in the industry itself. Only 13% of game developers are 45 or older, according to the AARP, which limits the perspectives that are in the room making decisions about design in the first place.

De Schutter says the well chronicled prevalence of crunch culture in the

games industry creates conditions that either end careers prematurely due to burnout or make working in the industry as an older adult even more difficult. But the young adult-skewing nature of the industry also creates an environment where older developers resort to "lying on their resumes because they are trying to make it seem like they were less accomplished."

Part of the solution is to instill ideas about accessibility and age-inclusive design in game designers early on, something that De Schutter and a team of faculty at Northeastern aim to do. Along with Celia Pearce, Casper Harteveld, Leanne Chukoskie and Miso Kim, De Schutter created the university's games and aging group.

"At the end of the day, I am training students now to think in this kind of way about games, which is completely paradigm shattering in comparison to what every other games program is doing," De Schutter says. "Games have meaning in peoples' lives, and that's what we want. We want people to be empowered and feel that this is a meaningful contribution to their lives."

Provided by Northeastern University