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The Promise of Digital Games for Older Adults

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Short Communication

Older adults are the fastest growing population in the world, with the number of those over sixty years old expected to grow to more than two-billion by 2050[1]. Social isolation and cognitive decline are two negative effects of the aging process and have consistently been identified by older adults as some of their main concerns about aging [2-4]. In addition, research has found social wellbeing and cognitive functioning to be associated with one another. A clear directional influence has not been established, since studies suggest that each influences the other [5,6]. Because of the interrelated nature of social and cognitive functioning, solutions to aid in the aging process may be more successful if they focus on both of these dimensions of wellbeing.

Older adults have reported that using the Internet has a positive impact on their feelings of social belongingness, social connectivity, and self-esteem [7,8]. However, older adults' engagement with new technology extendsbeyond their Internet use. Older adults are prominent digital game players; the number of older adults who play digital games increased from 9% in 1990 to 34% in 2014 [9]. As younger generations who grew up with digital games grow older, this number is expected to increase. With the increased popularity of digital games among older adults, it is useful to investigate how this form of leisure activity may be benefiting the older generation.

A growing body of research is looking outside artificial settings and into the daily lives of older adults who are integrating digital games into their lives organically and without organisational support. In one approach, researchers have begun asking older adults about the benefits that they perceive from playing digital games [10,11]. Older adults have identified cognitive benefits such as improved memory and feeling sharper [12]; along with social and emotional benefits such as feeling connected [13,14] and increased self-esteem [15,16]. Kaufman et al. (2016) [15] found that older adults who rated themselves as intermediate or advanced digital game players reported greater cognitive benefits compared to those who rated themselves as beginners. This is not surprising since playing at higher levels normally provides greater cognitive challenge for players. The next step is to identify which factors are associated with benefits of digital games for older adults as this can help in the development of successful digital games and interventions. Digital games hold great promise for enhancing older adults cognitive skills and socio-emotional lives, but more targeted interventions accompanied by rigorous research are needed to understand how to unlock these benefits.

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