ABSTRACT
This paper presents work in progress that informs current understanding of intersectional themes (age, gender, and digital games) that are important, but under-studied, in the player-computer interaction community. This paper draws on a 4-month participant observational study of game play and interest among active older women (aged 63-83, N=14). The results show how gender and age shape digital game interest and play among the participants. For them, being an older woman now means keeping up with the times, being active and helping others. They disregarded digital games that clashed with this identity. When the digital games projected it, their play was fun and productive, recommending the games to others. Current and future work research activities are outlined.

CCS CONCEPTS
•Social and professional topics •Seniors •Human computer interaction (HCI) •HCI design and evaluation methods •Field studies •Applied computing •Computer games

KEYWORDS
Older women, digital games, gender, gendered identity

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1 Introduction

Despite the increasing interest in digital games and older people [17,8,11,16], the significant proportion of adult women playing digital games [6], and the importance of intersectionality, i.e., individual’s identity is the product of intersecting social patterns, in current research on gender and games [10], research on the intersection of digital games, gender, and age with older women is mostly missing in the player-computer interaction community. From the papers published in previous CHI PLAY proceedings (14’-19’), we did not find any publication addressing digital games, gender, and older women. To get a broader picture, we conducted keyword searches in the ACM Digital Library (DL) and SCOPUS. We selected these two databases because they are relevant for this paper, covering a broad range of studies in player-computer interaction. We applied our search string (“older women” AND “digital games” AND “gender”) to anywhere in the ACM DL, and title, abstract and keywords in SCOPUS. We searched for papers written in English and published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and conference proceedings within the last ten years (2010 to 2020). We excluded papers that did not explicitly examine the intersection of digital games, gender and older women. The search in SCOPUS yielded 0 results. The search in the ACM DL yielded 6 papers. None addressed the intersection of digital games, age, and older women.

To start addressing this gap, this paper presents a qualitative study that outlines the remembered play experiences of (N=14) middle-class women (aged 63-83), explores their attitudes towards an archetypically gendered computer game, and discusses their experiences of playing casual games. Participants refused to play digital games now that might bring back positive reminiscences of playing mostly girls’ games when they were children. The refusal stemmed from their gendered identity. We define gendered identity as the personal sense of one’s own gender – whatever it might be - that is developed over a person’s life course. Keeping up with the times, being socially active, and doing useful activities for others (beyond household members) represents what it means to be an older woman for our participants. They disregarded digital games that clashed with this identity. When the digital games projected it, or parts of it, their play was fun and productive, recommending the games to others.

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At the Intersection of Digital Games, Gender, and Age
A Participant Observational Study with Active Older Women

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This paper introduces, to the best of our knowledge, a new element - gendered identity - in research on digital games and older people. This opens the door to digital games that go beyond the most predominant narrative of age-related decline [8, 16] to consider also dynamic gendered identities of their (older) players.

2. The study

We conducted a course aimed to introduce older people (60+) to digital games and related technologies, such as Social Network Sites (SNS), in Espacio CaixaMadrid (ECM), a social center owned by “la Caixa” Foundation in Madrid, Spain, over a 4-month period. The course was not designed to explore gender. The course took the form of a participant observational (PO) study. PO is a way to collect data by observing and taking part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied [4]. We conducted PO because it should help us address and understand three core concepts in our research: (a) play, a socially constructed, dynamic and diverse cultural practice [12]; (b) gender, which is embedded and constructed in everyday interactions [15, 23]; and (c) age, which is a biological attribute intertwined with social dimensions [2]. Ethical approval was granted by the ECM board.

The ECM director, based on prior discussions with the first author, who was the fieldworker and conducted the course, volunteered to recruit the participants. Given that we were newcomers to ECM, we considered that this recruitment strategy could be useful for the study. The inclusion / exclusion criteria, which were developed by the ECM director and us, were to be (a) 60+, (b) interested in digital games and (c) be willing to participate in a research study.

Fourteen (N=14) active, educated, middle-class Spanish women (2 aged 63-65; 8 aged 66-70; 3 aged 71-75; 1 aged 83) agreed to participate and signed the informed consent, which was prepared by the ECM director and the first author. Participants granted us written consent to take notes of our observations and conversations, and pictures of themselves in the courses, and use this material freely and without any restriction in publications related to this activity. Twelve attended almost all sessions. Conversations with the participants revealed that they were volunteers of VIACEMA, a non-profit Spanish association aimed to help older people to learn to use computers. Most knew each other through having organized or attended several activities, such as a book reading club and courses to support people with disabilities to learn to use computers, at ECM. They considered that taking part in these activities was meaningful and useful. They aspired to keep up-to-date and learn more about computers.

The course developed as follows. The first two weeks were devoted to SNS in an attempt to meet participants’ interests and establish rapport with them. In the 3rd week, the fieldworker asked the participants to identify the games they played, and their memories of playing them, when they were aged 10 to 30 – a period in which a ‘reminiscence bump’ occurs [9]. We explored their memories because lived experiences are key to understand the present circumstances of older people [18]. Their memories zeroed in on doll play. In the 4th week, the fieldworker conducted a focus group to explore whether participants’ memories of play could have shaped their attitudes, which are important predictors of technology adoption, towards playing gendered computer games now. The fieldworker demonstrated teaser videos on YouTube of Barbie Fashion Designer (BFD). BFD might be very far removed from participants’ interests, and old. Yet, BFD was a highly successful game in the 1990s, as it incorporated features that (most) girls tend to find appealing in games and is regarded as ‘extended doll play’ [20]. We used BFD as a ‘provocation to thought’ [22], since participants might have played it, or similar ones, with their grandchildren and children, or watched them playing it. From week 5 to 13 (we did not conduct 16 because three weeks were holidays), participants played online casual games, including the Leap Frog Test [7], which consists of moving two sets of frogs from the left to the right and vice versa, and Geographic Games [8], which is a quiz about geographical information. We wanted to understand the interplay of memories of play and attitudes towards computer games in actual gameplay situations. We chose casual games because laptops were their potential primary gaming platform. Participants played these games at the beginning (or end) of each session, in slots of 10-15 minutes, as all indicated that they wanted to do more useful activities, e.g., learning more about SNS and tablet computers. The casual games played where chosen by the fieldworker or suggested by the participants.

Twenty-six, two-hour sessions were conducted, two sessions per week. The fieldworker jotted notes of his observations and conversations with the participants during or immediately after the sessions. Following common practice in PO (and ethnographic) research, he wrote descriptive and more detailed notes – in this case, in his office at university – after each session. The other two authors did not participate in the fieldwork.

We analyzed the notes by conducting reflexive thematic analysis (TA) [3]. We choose reflexive TA, which has adopted in a recent (2019) CHI PLAY paper [19], because, in our opinion, fits well with participant observation, as it emphasizes meaning as contextual or situated, and researcher subjectivity as a resource [3]. The fieldworker read the notes, generated initial codes, and searched for themes by collating codes into potential patterns. He wrote and shared memos with the co-authors to discuss the potential themes and check the codes worked in relation to them. In keeping with reflexive TA, we did not aim for ‘consensus coding’ [3]. Instead, we aimed for a credible and rigorous interpretation of our participants’ experiences. The analysis finished when the results achieved that goal, in our opinion.

3. Results

The analysis outlined in Section 2 yielded 3 themes, i.e., a reflecting a pattern of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea, which we use to organize and present the results.
We use extracts taken from the fieldnotes to include the participants’ voices in the results. The voice of the fieldworker is also included to show how the interactions unfolded. These extracts have been translated into English by the authors. Participants are identified by codes, e.g. [P12]. We include brief analytic commentary sections to discuss key aspects of the results.

3.1 ‘No one expected to see a boy playing with dolls’: positive memories of playing gendered games

Technology and older people are not two worlds apart in ECM, which is buzzing with activity. Older people check their e-mails and read the news online, while others watch YouTube videos, create MS PowerPoint presentations, buy train and cinema tickets, work on personal projects, help each other…. Over coffee with P3 before today’s session, I raised the issue of games. She told me that, when she was a child, girls played with dolls, and that they had a lot of fun. We walked together to ECM and, when the session started, I invited her to share her memories. “The game I told you before consisted of sewing my dolls’ clothes and exchanging the clothes, and the dolls, with my friends and sisters. I have nice memories of playing this game”. I observed that, through nodding, the rest of the participants agreed. P6 raised her hand to say that her memories of play were about playing with dolls with her sisters in the playroom of her house – boys were not involved. Participants smiled, and seemed to agree. When I wrapped up the discussion, the oldest participant said, “this was the way it was in the Spanish society of the 1940-50s. Boys played boys’ games. No one expected to see a boy playing with dolls, or hopscotch, or skipping”. All participants agreed.

Commentary: The participants’ remembered experiences of playing highly gendered (doll) games were positive and beyond the notion of play itself. Their memories of play were situated within a socio-cultural context, which touched upon a gender belief system [13], which proposes that our perceptions about men and women are influenced by societal expectations. Thus, that determined the type of games that girls and boys should or were expected to play when they were children. This highlights that gameplay does not happen in a vacuum, which reinforces previous research (e.g. [20]) and extends it by showing that, in this case, gameplay is influenced by a way of thinking and acting in the Spanish society of the 1940-50s, when the role of many women was mostly one: housewife.

3.2 Stereotyped views of women that clash with their gendered identity: they are older women

In the coffee and book reading areas, and for about a fortnight, we have been discussing games participants played as youngsters. They enjoyed sharing their positive memories of play, which were descriptive and covered where they played, with whom, and how they created their own playful artefacts. Today’s session was remarkably different. When I showed the BFD trailer, I noticed that participants looked more serious. They hardly talked to each other or even moved. They seemed annoyed. All refused point-blank to play BFD. P7 voiced her opinion:

“Why is the game in pink? Is it because it is for girls? And for boys, what, blue? I think this is very old, silly, and promotes stereotypical views of women, rooted in the past. I’ve good memories of playing with dolls, but these were different times. Fortunately, over time, the role of women in society has, for the most part, changed. We do not want to lag behind because we are older and must stay at home, or cooking or doing women stuff because we are women. We want to keep active, get out, do things, learn, and help other people beyond our relatives. This is what we are and want to be”.

P14 added:

“We’ve all played with dolls, and we still play with them to some extent. I mean, this is something we, mums and grandmothers, have done at some point in our lives. The stereotypes are the problem. I’m glad to see that these social norms, which belong to different times, are now more relaxed or broken. We have contributed to it. I like to see my grandson cooking and oldies like us using computers.”

Commentary: The results show that BFD was a provocation to thought. Keeping up with the times, being socially active and doing useful activities for others represents what it means to be an older woman for our participants. They refused outright to play BFD because this game did not match this gendered identity. Instead, the image of girls and women portrayed by BFD ‘promotes stereotypical views of women, rooted in the past’, as put by a participant. This identity interplayed with their memories of play and past experiences, which encompassed perceived and desired changing roles of women in society over generations, and forged current aspirations in their older adulthood.

3.3 Performative aspect of age and gender while playing: active and busy older women, usefulness and learning, healthy competition, helping others

While wandering around ECM, I saw two older men playing the Leap Frog Test. How did they know about it? One of my participants (P1) noticed me, and said to me, “I encouraged them to play it. They got surprised… they did not expect this recommendation to come from a woman, you know… This game is very good for keeping your mind active. I play this game with the participants in my course. They love it.” Her comment confirmed a behavior I had observed in the courses. Participants, while waiting for a session to start, had a chat with other older people, and also helped them to use computers in ECM.

While P6 was playing the Geographic game with another participant, P8 told me: “This is the sort of game I want to play. It’s useful”. The most difficult aspect of this game was to locate with the mouse a river or a city on the Spanish map, but she overcame this barrier by using both hands to use the mouse. She
then asked the other participants who were playing the game: “How many points do you have? Ten thousand? Jeez, You know a lot! I’d better improve my answers and study (smiling)”. P8, while standing up and pointing at the map projected on the monitor, announced that “I learned the rivers at school and I can tell you that the game is wrong. I’ll look it up on Google and prove I’m not wrong!” Later on that day she e-mailed me a link to a webpage proving she was correct.

Piano Talent [21], a game to teach players how to play the piano online, was aesthetically very pleasant for the participants. Yet, they were unsure about its educational aspect. As P10, who played the piano, said, “I don’t know how anybody can learn to play the piano with this game”, and did not play this game. P12, who overhead her comment, said to us “Yes, I agree. We all here quite busy older women: we take care of our grandchildren, we have to attend meetings in the centre, run sessions…this week I’ve got two back to back! People think that if you are old, you have plenty of time. We want to learn and do interesting things; we don’t have time to waste on games like this one”.

I thought that my participants would like to play Typing Maniac [14], which consists of typing in the words that appear falling down the screen before they reach the bottom, since it could be useful – to practice and improve their typing skills – and fun. Both aspects were shared by Leap Frog Test and Geographic Games, the games they liked the most. However, Typing Maniac was too difficult, even for P4, whose typing skills were excellent – she had worked as a secretary. As P4 pointed out, “This game can make people like us realize we are getting rusty. I can’t tell people I help here, with low levels of education, to play it. It could put them off…”

Commentary: These results show how the performative aspect of gender and age manifested itself in the (lack of) interest in, and playing of some games. On the one hand, when the games matched their gendered identity, or some of its elements, as Geographic Games and the Leap Frog Test did, they played these games in a way that challenges stereotyped views of older people and digital technologies [5]. They integrated them in their practices with other technologies (e.g., teaching other people to use computers), and encouraging others to play them, challenging preconceived views of technology and its (young male) users. They engaged in healthy competition, something that has never been associated with male gameplay [9], and were even challenged by some potentially incorrect information (about Spanish and rivers, which was a core subject in the education of children in the mid twentieth century in Spain). Difficulties using the mouse were overcame by developing their own strategies, such as using both hands. On the other hand, when the digital games did not match their gendered identity, or perceived that playing them could go against it or would reinforce negative views of ageing, such as decline in functional abilities, that might put some older people off using computers, our participants did not either play or recommend them to others.

4. A ‘prequel’ to current and future work

The results suggest that digital games designed by considering that age and gender are both done, and projecting and matching identity traits of their (ageing) players, could provide them with more appealing and meaningful play experiences than designing games to compensate only for declining abilities, which plays a pivotal role in research with older people [8, 16]. Some older women might not want to play digital games to improve their declining lives but to reinforce and express how they see themselves. To gain a deeper understanding of gendered identity in game interest and play among older people, and to go ‘beyond Barbie’ [10], we are working with working-class older women and men, and exploring their attitudes towards and gameplay experiences of mobile (casual) games, due to its popularity [10].

In the discourse on ageing and digital games, a “highly functionalistic approach to the use of digital games runs through much of the research due to its preoccupation with social, mental, and bodily health or with the needs of the game industry” [8]. This view is also echoed in the gerontoludic manifesto [17]. Yet, usefulness, enjoyment, and fun co-existed in the results presented in this paper. This hints at the possibility that digital games designed for older people can provide them with richer playful experiences than those designed to compensate for their weaknesses and / or a lack of something they do not have. We plan to conduct co-design or participatory design sessions to explore the design of these games and delve into gendered identity – what do digital games that project or match the gendered identity of their ageing players look like, and why? Also, and bearing in mind the tensions in the digital games market, wherein a masculine culture dominates [1], and widespread stereotyped views of older people and digital technologies [5], we plan to interview game designers and developers to understand the challenges and opportunities to design commercial digital games for older people that explore the intersection of gender and age.

5. Conclusion

If older women have positive memories of playing gendered traditional games, why do they not demonstrate positive attitudes towards playing similar gendered digital games today? The results of our study show that it is wrong to assume that positive memories of gendered play will positively influence perceptions of similarly gendered digital games in older adulthood, as the decision depends strongly on how gender and age are both performed through engaging with digital games. Older people might not always be in need of help; instead, they can be active, competent, and judicious players. This opens the door for digital games portraying a more positive view of later life. Games that go beyond the most predominant narrative of decline to consider also dynamic gendered identities of their (older) players. Our current and future research is aimed at facilitating these digital games.

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