Gaming Motivators

Exploring how gamification motivations affect video game play among adults 50+

Gamification is the process of adding game-like elements to a task to encourage participation.¹ While the term “gamification” was coined around 2010, the idea of using games to make tasks more fun has been around since the 1980’s. Forty years later, gamification is being adopted by adults 50+ for both intrinsic, or internal motivations such as staying mentally sharp, and extrinsic or external motivations such as mastering or learning new skills. While there is certainly overlap between these two motivators, extrinsic motivations drive many 50+ gamers. More than twice as many people primarily play video games for intrinsic motivation, i.e. to stay mentally sharp, and many see learning something as a fringe benefit.

Those who play video games for mastery, learning or mental acuity also reap other benefits more often than the average gamer.

Two-thirds of 50+ gamers play video games for personal, intrinsic reasons, i.e. to stay mentally sharp (67%), and one-third play for extrinsic reasons, i.e. to learn something (33%).

Gamers who play to stay mentally sharp are also more likely to play more often (84% once a week or more often) than those who play for other reasons (73%).

50+ Gamers motivated to play video games either to learn or to stay mentally sharp are more likely than those who play for other reasons to think that when playing video games, it is important to have fun, be challenged and solve problems, and reduce stress.

A new study explores...

the motivators behind video game playing by adults 50+ and how gamification plays a role

¹“Gamification.”
Merriam-Webster,
www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gamification.

Those who primarily play video games to learn or to stay mentally sharp are roughly twice as likely to play before going to bed at night (79% and 73%, respectively) than when they wake up in the morning (35% and 34%, respectively) and significantly more likely to play online (70% and 64%, respectively) than other gamers (57%).

Still, for those motivated to play either to learn or those who play to stay mentally sharp, playing video games provides them with relief from anxiety or stress (71% and 66%, respectively) much more than the average video game player (57%).

Interestingly, a desire to stay mentally sharp through playing video games does not always translate into a significant financial investment in this hobby. In nearly every case, these types of gamers spend about the same or significantly less than typical gamers and are more likely – particularly those who are extrinsically motivated to learn while gaming – to download free games (15%) than the average player (9%).

Top important reasons for playing video games

Gamification helps 50+ gamers stay on top of their finances or track their health in fun and innovative ways.

Gamification can be found in many activities of adults 50+. Seven in ten (71%) of those who play video games to learn something have done so in a self-directing learning environment and two in five (41%) have done so for work or school courses.

Five in ten (51%) of those who play video games to learn, and four in five (39%) of those who play video games to stay sharp say they are interested in using gaming to learn other new skills or ideas, compared to only one in five (22%) of all 50+ gamers. They are also more likely than most to be interested in using apps, like Fortune City, Duolingo, or Thriv, to help reach a personal or financial goal (25% and 18%, respectively, compared to 11%).

Gamification also plays a role among this audience when it comes to interest in using games and gaming devices to stay healthy. One in three are interested in activities such as competing for points in online FitBit challenges or playing exercise-focused games, like Zumba fitness (37% play to learn, 32% play to stay mentally sharp).

More than one-half of those who play video games either to learn/master something or stay mentally sharp play more now than they did five years ago.

Tracking their health while playing exercise games is one way adults 50+ stay active as one in three own a wearable fitness device.

Those who play video games to learn something or stay mentally sharp are even more likely to use wearable fitness devices, like FitBits, Apple Watch, Garmin, Motiv Ring and Samsung Gear, and other technology to record their progress.

The positive effects of playing video games on overall emotional well-being outweigh the reduced time spent on other hobbies.

Two-thirds of those who are either extrinsically motivated to play video games in order to learn or intrinsically motivated to play games by staying mentally sharp believe playing video games positively impacts their overall emotional well-being much more than most (68% and 66%, respectively, compared to 56%).

While it is not surprising most 50+ gamers enjoy playing video games, those who are motivated to play because they want to learn (91%) and those who are motivated to play to stay mentally sharp (91%) get more enjoyment from playing than the average adult 50+ gamer (85%).

Those who play games to learn as well as those who play games to stay sharp are more likely than adults 50+ overall to subscribe to Amazon Prime—a key resource for educational materials.

Top important reasons for playing video games

Gamers love playing games – both online and offline—as a majority of those who play video games to learn and to stay mentally sharp also play traditional, non-video games including everything from chess to charades, and fantasy football to jigsaw puzzles.

Implications

Adults 50+ -- both gamers and non-gamers -- are already exposed to gamification in their daily lives, perhaps without even knowing it. From tracking one's health and competing against themselves or friends to setting and achieving financial goals, adults 50+ are likely familiar with the structure of relying on technology to support day-to-day tasks. However, it is very possible this population may not be aware of the breadth and depth of the potential to use gamification to better themselves, such as finding directions, saving money on groceries, learning a new language, meditating, losing weight, or even reading more. Adoption of more technology-supported gamification is likely among adults 50+ since they are already comfortable with the concept, they just need to know about it!

Those who are motivated to play video games to master/learn something or to keep their minds sharp are more likely than other gamers to play online, which means game and app developers should find ways to integrate learning or critical thinking into their online games and/or find a way to make currently single, off-line player games integrated with the internet.

It is important to note, regardless of the main motivator, this population spends about the same amount of money on games and apps as the next gamer, so it is not a population worth catering too specifically with expensive upgrades and gadgets. However, they are more likely to download free games, so advertisers of educational products – like podcasts, audiobooks, or lecture series – may find value in placing ads within downloads of free games involving critical thinking.

Thomas W. Malone, a professor at the Sloan School of Business at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), published a paper called, "What Makes Things Fun to Learn: A Study of Intrinsically Motivating Computer Games" which explored how children could learn while playing video games.

For more information, contact Brittne Nelson-Kakulla, bkakulla@aarp.org
For media inquiries, contact.media@aarp.org.