

## Electronic arts

# Designing video games for seniors

Forget the idea that video games are only for teenagers or geeks. Today, the industry is expanding its target audience and looking to attract the silver heads.

BY PATRICIA FLORIC

It's no secret anymore; the baby boomers are getting old and becoming a viable target group for many markets. Nintendo has

already launched a huge campaign focusing on elderly gamers. According to the advertising promoting their latest game consoles, "the Nintendo DS trains your brain and helps you get younger" while the Nintendo Wii can help the elderly control their movements.

While Nicole Kidman is busy exercising her brain capacity and promoting Nintendo DS, researchers are starting to think about what really makes a video game suitable for the elderly and what doesn't.

According to Dr Henk Herman, who is taking the field of video games for elderly people into the future: "currently, people aged 65 + are not adequate-

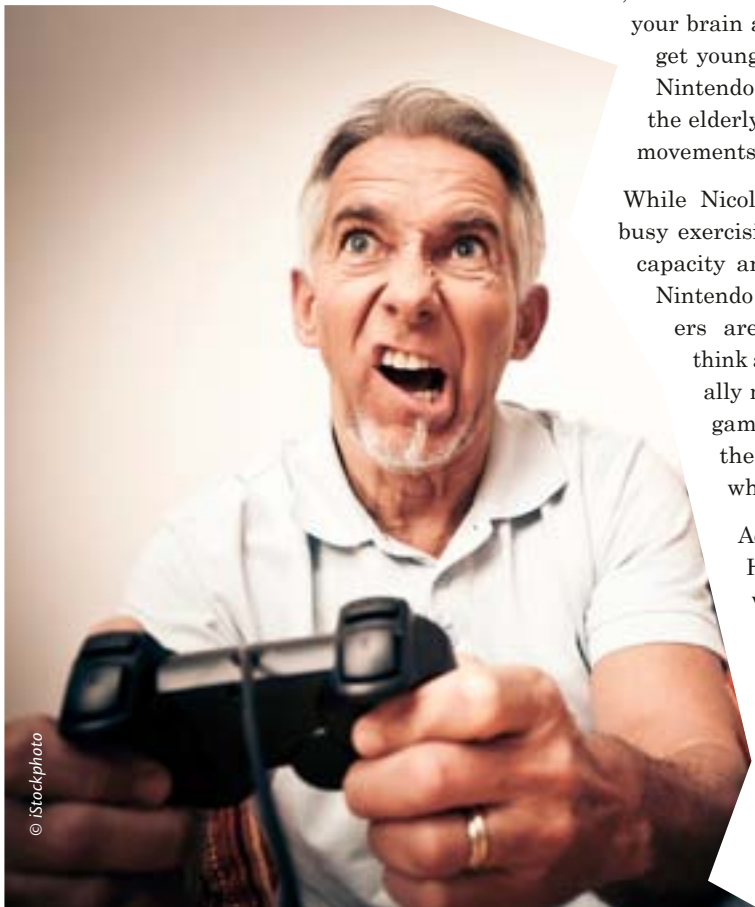
ly served by the majority of games available." His conclusions were made following much research and experimentation he conducted with seniors.

Dr Henk Herman is certain that video games can be of interest to elderly people, but only if we start designing the games properly, with their interests in mind; which has not been the case so far.

He and other researchers such as Dr Bob de Schutter, a researcher, assistant and game designer at Groep T, have conducted studies with seniors.

They have both organised focus groups with a range of people aged 65 to 80 and arrive at the same conclusions.

Dr Bob de Schutter explains how he worked in collaboration with students from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and elderly people to create a video game: "We asked our group of seniors to write in a diary every day what the most exciting thing that happened to them during the day was." This step was the beginning of a bigger process including meetings and game testing with seniors, which eventually saw the team come up with 13 concepts targeted at elderly interests. One of them was based on the French sport pétanque, another was reserved for a





multi-player game aimed at bringing together two generations, grandchildren playing with their grandparents, doing puzzles and answering questions.

For Bob de Schutter, this last game-prototype illustrates in a nutshell his theoretical model of a good video game for elderly people. It can be summarised in three essential concepts: “Firstly, there has to be an element of culture; people from a certain age like to know that what they are doing has a purpose, that they can learn something from it”.

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Secondly, from the age of 40, as some studies have revealed, people want to bring something to society – this is what Dr Bob de Schutter calls “the element of contribution”. In the game where grandparents are playing with their grandchildren, “they can help the children answer the questions and vice-versa. This is the motivation behind the game.” And finally, the element of connectedness: When Bob de Schutter started to study games for seniors, he realised that today the main activity of retired people is watching TV. “As they are not working anymore, they meet fewer people and their network has been reduced to a very small number of people around them, often family and some neighbours. So they watch TV.”

Both Dr Bob de Schutter and Dr Henk Herman explain that even though there is this need to interact with others, and seniors really enjoy the company of others, they find it difficult to enter into and trust the digital world. “Today, most seniors are playing solo games or interactively with people they know or they can see in a games room”, says Dr Henk Herman. “We have to be careful and understand that the generation of people who are now retired, didn’t grow up with

the Internet and still have to be taught about new technology before being able to appreciate it properly”, he adds.

### HEALTHY VIDEO GAMES

Many studies are today claiming that elderly people could benefit from a healthier life through playing games. According to Dr Henk Herman, it is important to conduct such research, and he believes that “video games could be used for rehabilitation and for helping slow down dementia.”

But it has to be medically well designed,

and he warned against any commercial techniques such as Nintendo’s latest advertising spot. “Retired people say that new games like the Nintendo DS games are too child-

ish: the colours and shapes are cartoon-like and not accessible for seniors”, he says, adding “as we get older, some colours are more difficult to see, images

become a bit yellow, so using relevant colours will make them more accessible; but today, video game companies trying to attract seniors are still not designing the games properly for them.”

When it comes to video games using movement, such as Nintendo Wii, Bob de Schutter agrees with his colleague and recognises that this is a good start and represents a new way of designing video games requiring use of the whole body. “This can help people to control their movements, and many retirement homes are already convinced that they should include video games in the

rehabilitation training at their facilities. However, while thinking about the proper way to help people get fitter and in better shape, we should not lose sight of the game aspect behind it.”

Bob de Schutter has been a gamer all his life, and today seems to be thinking about a good way to prepare his future retirement. He dreams about the day when games for the elderly are designed not only for rehabilitation purposes but also simply for the pleasure of entertainment: “When I’m older, I’d like to have plenty of choices of video games.” ■

