

# “Not without my kitties”: The old woman in casual games

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## ABSTRACT

Digital games have become a mainstream medium used by players of all ages and genders. Yet, aging adults are still relatively seldom featured in digital games as game-controlled or player-controlled characters. The representation of old women featured as player-characters in four casual digital games is here analyzed through a close playing. In their portrayal of the four player-characters, the games reinforce existing understandings of old women as unimportant, homebound, lonely and child-like. Yet, the player-characters are simultaneously portrayed as highly capable and resisting victimization. During play, it is in fact the player who may be left wanting, while the old women contain all the potential for progression. This ambiguity can be understood in several ways. Firstly, it may serve to position the old women of the games as Others who must contain both the hope and fears for old age. Secondly, the games can be read as parodic texts; humorous comments on both previous digital games, in particular hyper-masculinity and militarized settings, as well as on notions of active aging.

## Keywords

aging, gender, digital games, representation, discourse

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As digital games increasingly become a mainstream medium used by players of all ages and genders [18, 54], the content has also become more varied. Despite of this, aging adults are still relatively seldom featured in digital games as game-controlled or player-controlled characters [73]. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, outlets for so-called casual games offer a variety of digital games where old women function as the primary player-character. Using the search term “granny” in the game section of Apple’s App Store, it is possible to identify close to hundred games of this kind, featuring titles such as *Getaway granny* [67], *Gangster granny* [32] and *Farting granny vs. iron robot man* [64]. Greying ladies, apparently, are popular denizens in casual games alongside zombies, dragons, and ninjas. While digital games research has focused on the portrayal of gender, race and sexual orientations in digital games [4, 12, 16, 17, 46, 48, 50, 61], the representation of old age is an overlooked topic, partly because featuring older characters is rare in digital games in the first place [73]. As one of the first forays into the representation of ageing in digital games via a close playing it is here the intention to explore how old women that function as player-characters in casual games are portrayed. Moreover, how do these portrayals serve to reinforce or

negotiate prevailing discourses on old women in popular culture?

While the phrasing “old woman” may be considered impolite or even demeaning, it has been chosen here in order to embrace old age as a valuable and inseparable part of existence. With the designation, I also stress that the focus is on women who are no longer considered middle aged, but have passed that stage. At the same time, I am quite aware that what it means to be old is always a cultural construct [35], and it is precisely this constitution of “oldness” that will be examined here. With a reference to previous studies of the portrayal of old women in popular culture, it is here the intention to examine the portrayal of old women within four digital games via a close playing [9]. The games in question, all IOS games played on a tablet, are *Super granny* [59], *Granny Smith* [51], *Angry gran* [3] and *Granny vs. zombies* [40]. The approach taken here is informed by discourse theory [22, 25, 71]. Central for the analysis are notions of othering through representation based on the work by Stuart Hall [27] and Homi Bhaba [7].

## 2. POPULAR PORTRAYALS

In the introduction to the anthology *Figuring age: Women, bodies, generations*, Kathleen Woodward remarks upon the consistent invisibility of old women [53]. Marginalization, indeed, carries through as a persistent trope in the many different treatments of the representation of aging women [30]. Teresa Magnum, for instance, paints a vivid picture, referring to the tendency in the popular narrative paintings of Victorian Britain to “push children and those women marked by stooped shoulders, fallen faces and unruly hair to the margins of family groups” [49: 60]. Magnum suggests that this tendency to marginalize the very young and old alike is linked to a shift in the understanding of age, to a great degree brought about by the new welfare laws that were passed in the middle and later half of the 19th century. These legislations meant that both elders and children were given new and less industrious roles in society. Andrew Blaikie, likewise, stresses the lack of economic productivity as central in Modernity’s understandings of aging [10]. Jenny Hockey and Allison James further examine the link between children and the elderly in *Growing up and growing old* [36], discussing the tendency in Modern Western society to equate children and old people in a more or less explicit act of infantilization. Hockey and James throughout their book point to infantilization’s corrosive effects on the aging adult’s sense of self. Nevertheless they also suggest that a possibility for resistance may be found in actively embracing and using the status of being child-like to resist society’s expectations regarding how one is a proper old person (see also Hepworth [35]).

### 2.1 Gender and old age

Women have traditionally been doubly struck by aging. With the onset of menopause women lose their primary function in patriarchal society, that of birthing children [24]. Then, passing middle age, the authority of the “proper adult” is lost, too [49]. Examining the roles available for old women in children’s

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Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015), June 22-25, 2015, Pacific Grove, CA, USA. ISBN 978-0-9913982-4-9. Copyright held by author(s).

classics, Sylvia Henneberg [34] argues that there are but three. Old women tend to be portrayed as 1) weak and incapable, 2) as overly concerned with the safety and well-being of their families to the detriment of their own good, 3) or as evil crones. Similarly, Karen Stoddard [66] in her early 1980ies study of roles for older females in popular films contends that for women over a certain age the only positions available are those of the good or meddling grandmother. A study of American popular comic strips from 1972-1992 reaches similar conclusions [28].

## 2.2 Consumerism and active aging

Importantly, the above conceptualizations of aging and old women have been changing gradually over the last twenty years. This change in perceptions and portrayals is partly due to consumer society's readiness to embrace the aging consumers, but probably also related to more recent notions of active aging due to concerns over demographic developments in the West [8, 23]. While the active, fit and still productive "young old" have become more visible; this image at the same time delineates that of the "old old" to the extreme periphery [57, 58, 69]. Moreover, new stereotypes replace the old ones:

Images of a sexless or asexual old age, for instance, have been substituted by images of the 'sexy oldie' (Vares, 2009), which create another set of assumptions in relation to a successfully aged female body, by enforcing and reproducing heteronormative youthfulness, in line with a youth-centred postfeminist cultural framework [...] [43: 33]

The aging women remain useful citizens as long as they adhere to requirements of "youthful" presentability, remaining at the same time economically productive as consumers [72].

Symptomatically, in more recent studies of the representation of aging adults it is not so much the notion of invisibility that is emphasized as under or misrepresentation. Newer studies suggest that aging women are not figured as often as their numbers warrant in the news, filmed and written fiction [31, 54, 56, 60]. Moreover, although representations have diversified somewhat, aging adults are still not portrayed so as to adequately represent the breadth of practiced aging identities [60]. Analyzing the reception of Judy Dench in the role of M, Eva Krainitzki [43] stresses that old women are no longer restricted to being either angelic and nurturing or scheming and troublesome. Increasingly, they are given more diverse roles in film and on television. Yet, as Krainitzki's analysis suggests, powerful older women are still a controversial motif. In the case of Judy Dench as M, great pains are for instance taken to stress M's additional – and more traditionally female – roles as mother, wife and widow. It seems that there is still only a fine line between the acceptable powerful old woman, teetered safely in traditional female roles, and that of the witch, who earns her power only by becoming inhumane and standing outside society.

## 3. DISCOURSE AND THE OTHER

The relation between public representations of people and the ways in which individuals make sense of existence is complex and dynamic. Yet, while a variety of readings may be made of the texts circulating in society, dominant discourses establish certain subject positions as available and meaningful while others are marginalised or made incomprehensible [22, 25, 71]. Jon Hendricks and Cynthia Leedham in their discussion of literature on ageing advise that the analyst should be aware of the particular literary style and the intention behind the portrayal:

Before one takes comic portrayals of the foibles of the elderly as an indication of ageism, one should remember how often the rashness of youth has also been satirized. One should not, however, err too far in the other direction by considering what is said and the way it is said as simply a matter of technique. Literary conventions and the way in which they are used may tell us something about what people consider important. [33: 2-3]

A discursive approach, however, radically moves beyond this stance, particularly in two regards. Firstly, discourse is understood not as an expression of people's preoccupations but as the very apparatus that enables certain preoccupations to be made while silencing others (22: 61-62, 71: 393-394). In other words, discourse is constitutive; an establisher of truth. Thus, while the four games to be analysed do not intend to give realist, accurate or full portrayals of old women, they are consumer products and as such have to offer a discourse on ageing and gender that will appear understandable and credible to a large audience. This necessitates an adherence to existing dominant discourses on ageing and gender. Secondly, as discourse does its work regardless of the originators' intention, the important matter is the results it brings about – the truths it establishes – rather than the possible intent behind a given statement [22: 33-34]. Hence, the games discussed here are not singled out on the basis of the possible objectives of their creators, but are instead regarded as examples of the on-going play of discourses within popular culture.

### 3.1 The old woman as Other

As suggested previously, in Western society women once they stop keeping up with the regime of youthfulness come to inhabit a position of Other due to the loss of biological and economical productivity. In Foucauldian terms, they are no longer docile bodies that obediently serve society [21: 25-27]. Concerning the representation of the Other, Stuart Hall writes:

[...] people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – "them" rather than "us" – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes - good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling - because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time!* [27: 229]

Hall here suggests that representations of the Other, rather than being solely positive or negative function as a means for incorporating both the fear and fascination in a shared utterance. It is a way of taming both the lure and the threat of the Other through signification, so to speak. Homi Bhabha regards this as the fixity of stereotyping discourse "that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" precisely to maintain the discursively constituted essentiality in the first place [7: 95]. Bhabha, likewise, stresses the inherent ambiguity of stereotypes, examining this discursive construction in relation to the productivity of – in his case colonial - power [7: 96]. Analyzing representations of the Other, then, it is the subject position created and how power plays out that should be in focus, rather than an assessment of whether the given stereotypes are positive or negative as such.

## 4. ANALYSING DIGITAL GAMES

Digital games due to their peculiar materiality consist both of an execution layer and an underlying processing layer [1, 30, 39]. This double constitution is a fundamental issue that should directly influence the way in which a researcher seeks access to a digital game as a work to be analysed.

Given the twofold meaning layers of digital games, of which the procedural part often takes precedence over the solely expressive due to the structure's requirement for outside input, it is important to understand that players in many cases can play a digital game without much consideration of how game tokens and settings are portrayed. What matters in a concrete playing session, at least for some types of players, is often not the cultural significance that one may read out of the audio-visual output but rather what can be done within the game and how this aids the player in accomplishing the set goals or victory conditions [47]. Hence, while there is never a one to one relation between a given representation and what kind of meaning the individual reader takes away with her [26], digital games radicalise the meaning-making situation further by offering two distinct and often competing reference systems; that of ludic rules and processes on the one hand, and that of broad cultural signification on the other [39].

Should a player be concerned only with winning, all that matters is means and ends. This does not mean that the broader cultural signification processes digital games enter into should be ignored. Thus, Miguel Sicart argues that the human player is always *also* an ethical agent, capable of engaging with the digital game's dimension of cultural signification [62: 197]. Even so, it must be remembered that a digital game's mechanisms are an integral part of its textuality, forming the foundation – even while not being directly observable – for the representations that can be made. That is, the various meanings one may read out of a digital game depend as much, if not more, on the procedures available for action and the set goals, as the signs playing out on the surface [11, 13]. Thus, in order to analyse a digital game in terms of discourse one must play it to get an insight in its machinations [2, 9]. Here my own playing of the games is supplemented by user reviews, player comments, and the gameplay videos of others; sources that all serve to render the texts visible for scrutiny.

## 5. GRANNY GAMES

In order to provide a shared foundation for the analysis to follow, the four digital games will be briefly described in terms of their overall game mechanics and line of action.

### 5.1 *Super granny*

*Super granny* is the most – and only – well established brand of the four, and its use of an old woman as the player-character may have been a likely inspiration for the other available 'granny games'. The version of *Super Granny* analyzed here is a mobile version of the fifth game in the highly successful *Super granny* series, first created for PC in the mid 2000'ies. The series, then, is part of the first wave of casual games, targeting a new (older, female) audience than traditional AAA games [6]. Genre-wise, *Super granny* is a puzzle-game, heavily inspired by the classic *Lode Runner* [63]. It is a multi-level game where each level takes the form of a multi-storey structure that can be accessed via ladders, by digging holes, riding flying leaves and many other means. The story preceding the gameplay depicts Super Granny in her garden, resting on a recliner together with a lot of kittens. Before drowsing off, Super Granny wonders where “the runt of the litter”, Twinkletoes, has gone. The story then cuts to a grown-

up Twinkletoes, now Super Granny's nemesis Dr Meow. Despising Super Granny's affection, he has turned to evil. In his secret layer under Granny's house he has invented a shrinking ray that he uses on Granny and her remaining kittens. Now the player is tasked with directing the shrunk Super Granny in rescuing the kittens spread out over her garden and house, while avoiding or taking out “meanies” such as “running water”, spiders, ants, and other fantastic creatures. In order to progress through the structures and protect herself, Super Granny uses means such as spades to dig holes and traps, watering cans to water plants, umbrellas to fly, baseball bats to hit hostile creatures and so on. All the different actions are carried out with a simple control scheme, using both hands on each side of the screen. The difficulty of levels increases with progress, requiring the player to figure out how to overcome the particular challenges of a given layout. During play, the voice of an elderly woman exclaims a variety of remarks, such as “I've got ants in my bloomers”, “nothing that a little salt and a soak can't cure” and “that was harder than the Sunday crosswords”.

### 5.2 *Granny vs. zombies*

*Granny vs. zombies* is another example of a popular format, the side-scrolling shoot 'em up. This is a genre that can be traced back to the mid 1980ies and titles like *Commando* [14]. These games feature one or two player-characters (in the early days typically soldiers) who on foot must make their way through a series of environments fighting hordes of hostile creatures. Additionally, within recent years zombies have been a prevalent trope in mobile and browser-based gaming, probably due to the popularity of a series like *The walking dead* [19] as well as the highly successful game *Plants vs. zombies* [53]. In the case of *Granny vs. zombies*, it is Granny who must defend herself against invading zombies, first inside the home and then out in the streets and the countryside, with the final battle taking place at the graveyard. For this task, different types of weapons are available from baseball bats to bazookas – as well as the powerful fart; an ability that builds up over time and can be speeded up by an intake of cauliflowers. Gameplay consists in avoiding being hurt, choosing appropriate weapons, taking out zombies and picking up the loot left by dead zombies. This is done via two different buttons in each side of the screen. As in other side-scrolling games, once a level is completed access is given to new and more difficult levels.

### 5.3 *Angry gran*

With regards to *Angry gran*, the objective of this side-scroller beat 'em up game is to make Gran get as far as possible down a run-down city street by gathering points. In this genre the player-character fights numerous enemies either unarmed or with melee weapons. Side-scrolling beat 'em ups began as martial arts themed games in the mid 1980ies, with titles such as *Spartan-X* [38], changing to street brawling with *Nekketsu kōha kunio-kun* [68]. Unlike most games of this genre, there are no clearly distinguishable levels in *Angry gran*. The same city street just continues for as long as the player can keep Gran going, the only markers of progress being checkpoints along the way. Points and money are earned by making Gran hit the people – most either young or posh looking – and objects she passes with her cane, baguettes, a rolled up paper, and so on. This is done by holding down a finger to charge whatever item is held, then letting go to place a punch. If no target is hit, Gran will be placed immobile in a wheelchair for a short amount of time. It is also important to avoid hitting patrolling policemen, as this will result in Gran being straitjacketed for a similar amount of time. With the reward

money Gran's abilities and "weapons" may be updated, resulting in her lasting longer and longer stretches of street as well as earning more money. No background story to explain the scenario is given, and the player is left to wonder why Gran is, indeed, so angry. The only hint of a context is the starting area of the game, where Gran is shown sitting in a rocking chair in a living room.

#### 5.4 *Granny Smith*

The last game, *Granny Smith*, is a physics-based 2D platformer in the tradition of *Sonic the Hedgehog* [65] and *Super Mario World* [52], though simpler in its control scheme. A short narrative sequence preludes gameplay. Here Granny Smith sits on her porch in a rocking chair, listening to jazz music from an old radio while she polishes a green apple (her namesake). Looking at her apple, Granny Smith's eyes change into green hearts, implying her incredibly attachment to the apples that grow on the trees just off the porch. Along comes a young boy on roller skates, catching an apple on the go. This angers Granny Smith who goes into the old barn shown in the background, digging out her own old roller skates. When gameplay starts, Granny Smith is ready to pursue the thief on her roller skates, cane in hand. The objective in this multi-level game is to get to the apples that float over the track at strategic points before the thief. A trail of coins in the air can, likewise, be picked up, yielding points that players may use to skip a level. Granny Smith is automatically propelled forwards, and gameplay consists in executing jumps and grabbing wires with the cane via a simple two hand control scheme. Getting safely through a level is enough to gain access to the next level, but the full reward is only given if Granny Smith manages to overtake the boy, securing her apples.

### 6. GRANNIES IN ACTION

The four games all designate the female player-character the role of "granny" or "gran" via their titles. While in such simple games as these, the focus tends to be on gameplay rather than story, games from the same genres are full of named player-characters such as "Sonic the Hedgehog", "Billy Lee" or "Duke Nukem". In this case, however, the old women are not given the individuality of having their own name but are instead left only with titles that reduce them to a certain social role and age. - Although it can be argued that "Granny Smith" may be the name of the player-character in *Granny Smith*, this label may as well refer to the apples that the old woman so loves. This lack of a name underlines the old women's initial invisibility and inconsequentiality. Apart from Super Granny, none of the other three player-characters are ever linked to a family that should warrant the role of grandmother. They are simply women over the reproductive age who do not look "young" anymore, and the only label left for such seems to be that of "granny" regardless of whether family ties warrant this or not.

#### 6.1 Looking like grannies

Even though the four games employ different visual styles, the four old women look remarkably alike with the greatest diversity being in the slimness of the figures. Thus, all are grey or white haired with large glasses. Other markers of age are wrinkles, sagging breasts, and the hair in a bun or bonnet. Granny Smith in addition to her shirt and skirt wears a small cape. In terms of looks it is safe to conclude that all four women are presented stereotypically – apart from Granny Smith's cape – looking more like old women of earlier decades than contemporary old women. This is a tendency found in other studies of the representation of old women [60].

In the case of *Granny Smith* there is a tension between the traditional Southern porch, the conventional old-fashioned clothes and the cape. Since Granny Smith does not wear formal clothes, which would explain the cape, I understand it instead as a nod to superhero outfits. This signals that Granny Smith is no ordinary old woman. Initially, this may be seen to challenge stereotypical understandings. However, I will argue that the cape's fantastic qualities rather serve to stress the remaining traditional elements as *the reality of aging*. The cape is precisely required to mark Granny Smith as out-of-the-ordinary, underlining the impossibility of conceiving a "normal" old woman as possessing those qualities that Granny Smith turns out to have.

#### 6.2 Home, garden and the great wide world

Through the representation of settings, the four games offer a discursive construction of what kind of spaces old women are expected to occupy. Notably, all the games start off in the home or in the garden with three of the old women sitting in a rocking chair or resting on a deck chair. Only the player-character of *Granny vs. zombies* seems to exert herself, as the introductory graphics imply she may be gardening. These representations, at least at the outset, imply that old women belong in the home and its garden. The game-texts, however, are ambiguous on this point. Once gameplay starts, three of the four player-characters leave home and only Angry Gran is seen back home between playing sessions.

Granny Smith travels through the countryside, cityscapes and outer space in pursuit of the apple thief; she takes action and gets out into the world. Likewise, the zombie-battling old woman, once she has defeated the first waves of zombies inside the home, takes to the streets where hordes of zombies keep appearing. For her, home is no longer a safe place and she can as well get out there, must get out there, in order to escape a fate worse than death, namely dehumanization. Susan Behuniak suggests that zombies and Alzheimer's disease are connected in both popular and scientific discourse:

[...] the frightening celluloid images of fictional characters called zombies have leaked into the popular and scholarly discourse about real people who have Alzheimer's disease, constructing them as animated corpses and their disease as a terrifying threat to the social order. The zombie-AD patient connection is not therefore a case of art imitating life, but of a far more complex cultural relationship. The zombie instills fear by drawing from cultural anxieties, and then reflecting them back to the population that in turn breaths life and strength into them by applying this fictional representation to social realities. [5: 72]

Behuniak argues that the fictional zombie and the very real senile person through discourse come to inhabit the same traits, in turn invoking both fear and repulsion. In *Granny vs. zombies*, however, it is those much younger than Granny who have become zombies, leaving Granny alone to defend her humanity against the onslaught of her former neighbors. Thus, the player and Granny together fight the ultimate threat of aging, that of becoming a "living dead". The two last levels of the game's story mode take place at a graveyard; a reminder that even when zombies are successfully killed off, "true death" is still the ultimate end for everyone.

The old woman of *Angry gran* takes to the city streets for more unclear reasons. The contrast between the image of the old woman sitting in her quiet living room and the lively street invites a reading where the player's actions turn into a way of relieving boredom for both Angry Gran and the player. Gameplay becomes an outlet of nervous energy, of escaping the unbearable waiting for things to come. The player is implicated in this attempted escape from docility that will end sooner or later because death, like the game in question, cannot be beaten. Only Super Granny remains in her garden and house, now a place full of threats and obstacles due to her diminutive size. In this game, then, it is the familiar that is suddenly revealed as uncanny due to a conflict with a loved one.

### 6.3 Capable and cheerful

Even though the old women are presented largely in stereotypical ways both in terms of looks and the settings they initially inhabit, their actions defy stereotypes of old age. Most importantly, contrary to the limited roles available to old women discussed by Henneberg [34], none of these women are helpless or accept victimization. Super Granny, for instance, does not appear dismayed at all to find herself shrunk to insect size. She just good-naturedly sets out to locate and rescue her cats. Importantly, this mission is not one of self-sacrifice [34]. The same is true for Granny Smith, who chases after her apples due to a similar intrinsically motivated devotion. In the face of approaching zombie hordes, Granny is also ready to launch straight into the action of violently defending herself with any means available. She even turns some of the more embarrassing features of her aging body – the strong farts – into a means of self-defense. Everyone else in her vicinity have been turned into zombies, and Granny fights solely on her own behalf.

Angry Gran differs from the three others in being over-capable. She has too much energy, is far too strong, reminiscent of the undisciplined elders in British limericks [49]. Just like the old women and men in these popular rhymes, Angry Gran does not appear to accept the role of submissive and invisible elderly person. This lack of discipline makes her dangerous; she becomes an over-thrasher of public order. Interestingly, Angry Gran is punished by two different instances for her unacceptable behavior. If she hits a police officer, society deems her insane, symbolized by the straitjacket. However, if Angry Gran misses a hit, she is also punished, ending up immobile in a wheelchair. In that case it is conventional old age itself that punishes her for failing in her violent attempt to escape it. Angry Gran, then, is caught between a rock and a hard place because society and the available conception of aging have left her without any constructive means of being. Her situation is only temporarily escapable through outbursts of frustrated aggression. In this way the old woman who wants to remain an active and capable authority in her own life turns into a ridiculous, evil villain, reminiscent of the duchess and queen in *Alice's adventures in wonderland* [15] and the witch in folk-tales [34, 49].

Both Super Granny and Granny Smith are presented as somewhat infantile, not only in their extreme devotion to cats and apples but also in their demeanor. Super Granny chatters throughout the game in a simple-minded, childish way. Granny Smith wears a cape and uses roller-skates, something that is fully acceptable when children do it, but more unexpected in an adult. Angry Gran, likewise, behaves similar to an undisciplined child. Thus, the games establish the childishness of three of the four characters as a fact of oldness, fixing the three figures in a second childhood.

### 6.4 Old and alone

While none of the old women in the four games are represented as helpless or passive, their relation to the world outside the home is still to a great degree defined by victimization and the aggression resulting from that. Super Granny from one game to the other has to rescue her kittens because they get lost or taken. Moreover, her first kitten, Twinkletoes, has become her arch nemesis. Granny is incessantly attacked by zombies. Granny Smith is robbed of her prized apples. Even if Angry Gran is not explicitly victimized and rather commits violence against others, one can speculate about the cause of her behavior. Perhaps she has fallen victim to society's requirement for proper aging? In any case her relation to the rest of the world is based on making victims of others in order to not be one herself.

As they are depicted in the game worlds, three of the old women are devoid of any positive contact with other humans. Granny Smith does not laugh off the boy's lust for an apple, putting on her roller-skates to have fun with a new friend. Likewise, Angry Gran can only reach out to others through violence. Granny does not even have a choice, as everyone else have been zombiefied. Refusing to become a "living dead" herself, she is left without company. Whether these examples can be fairly interpreted as a discursive construction of old age as isolated can be discussed. It may likewise be understood as the result of the inherent conflict that most games tend to revolve around [41]. On the other hand, the requirement for conflict does not rule out the possibility of the player-character having allies, friends and family. Yet, three of the four old player-characters do not seem to be attached to any living beings at all. They are utterly alone.

The case of Super Granny differs from that of the others because she refers to her grandchildren whose toys are strewn all over the garden. She also has her beloved kittens. Yet, it is precisely her (misdirected and exaggerated) love that lands Super Granny in trouble in the first place as this is mentioned as the cause of Dr Meow's aggression. This contributes to marking Super Granny as a lonely old woman who, due to her need for relating to someone, loves (the wrong creatures) too much. In the case of Super Granny, there is another possible source of company, however, namely the player. Throughout the game she addresses the player as "dear", giving directions related to gameplay and idly chatting. In this way, Super Granny may be seen to establish a kind of doting relation to the person playing the game.

### 6.5 Player and player-character

The relation between player and player-character, according to Petri Lankoski, should be understood in terms of two kinds of engagement, namely that related to goals and that of empathy [44]. Another way to conceptualize this distinction is to regard the player-character either in terms of access to the game world and its possibilities or as a relatable character. Importantly, the two types of engagement often intertwine in actual gameplay.

As both access-points and characters all the four old women are highly capable, agile and self-reliant. In fact, when Super Granny at times trips, landing on her bottom, it is not due to any deficiencies of her aging body but solely due to the player's poor handling of game controls. This results in a chastising of the player, when she exclaims: "I wish Edison never invented videogames". Likewise, if Granny Smith executes a bad timed jump on her roller skates, landing face-down in the dirt, it is the player who has failed her. Even after a horrifying series of somersaults, she automatically gets up and continues the chase. If Granny does not hold against the swarming zombies, the player is

to blame, and should Angry Gran end up in a straitjacket or wheel chair, this happens because the player did not time the attacks properly. While the potential to fail is always the player's rather than the player-character's, in case of the games discussed here this may result in a possible role reversal on the level of character. Facing the challenges that confront the old player-characters, it is the player who may end up being inadequate (regardless of age) rather than the "grannies". In this way, stereotypical roles of young and old may be reversed in the execution of gameplay. The helplessness and bodily failings often associated with old age [70: 192-193] are turned back upon the player, while the old women contain all the potential for successful progression. Here it is not the old who must catch up.

In terms of empathic engagement, the potential for relational asymmetry emerges in two of the games, putting the player-character at the player's mercy. This possibility appears in *Angry gran* and *Granny Smith* for two reasons. Firstly, the games are relatively simple and levels are easily repeated. This lowers the stakes in terms of how much the player will lose by failing. Secondly, some players may find enjoyment in the way that these games visibly punish the player-characters for the players' lack of skill. Angry Gran ends up in a straitjacket or wheelchair, while the player loses relatively little if a target is missed. Granny Smith, similarly, looks rather comical when she falls face down into the dirt after a bad jump. The two games, then, offer players the opportunity to punish their charges for their childish antics, thereby stressing a reading that offers the old women up for ridicule and, even, chastisement.

## 7. AMBIGUOUS AGING

Stephen Katz argues that traditional gerontological power/knowledge produces subjects who need to be managed [42]. Yet, as discussed earlier, in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards a new situation has emerged as society increasingly demands aging subjects who can manage themselves, offering those who are capable of keeping decay at bay a position of near normalcy. In a similar vein, the discussed digital games represent the old women as characters with agency, capable of (in the case of Angry Gran attempts at) self-management.

Yet, simultaneously their otherness is maintained by fixing difference in two ways. Firstly, the stereotypical look of all four player-characters maintain them as old (fashioned) in relation to the normalcy of youthfulness in general and with regards to the player-characters of digital games in particular. Secondly, Granny Smith's cape and apple-obsession, Super Granny's excessive love of cats, Angry Gran's corporal violations of others, and Granny's insistence on hyper-violent defense all indicate their difference in relation to "ordinary" and properly behaving old women.

### 7.1 Binary positions

The four games offer an ambiguous vision of old women. The player-characters are presented as both old-fashioned and belonging in the home *as well as* as agentic and capable. In this they can be seen to simultaneously embody the productive subject's fears and hopes for old age. Stuart Hall suggests that such ambiguity is central for the representations of the Other [27].

The games, then – apart from *Angry gran* – celebrate the dream of an active old age but at the same time cannot escape the scary prospect of decline, loneliness and death. The strategy for handling the latter is in all cases a marking of the old women's lacking normalcy; foremost in comparison with younger persons, but also with respect to "ordinary" old people. The latter portrayal hints at – and in the case of *Angry gran* directly underlines – that

although the ideal for old women is continued self-management for as long as possible, there is always the risk of being over-capable. If she is too insistent of being in charge and doing things her own way, the old woman is turned into an unruly child or a witch.

## 7.2 Parody

There is even a supplementary reading to be made. Namely, to treat the four games as parodic texts; as a particular form of discourse that references existing discourses, changing these in more or less subtle ways in order to examine and make laughable its offset. Robert Hariman describes this as a "doubling", an operation that draws attention to form and thereby potentially serves to expose the very discursiveness of the referenced text [29]. Parody, as pointed out by Linda Hutcheon may, of course, equally well be used to preserve the status quo as to reinvent and challenge [37].

I will argue that it may be fruitful to see the four games as parodies that tackle both previous games and (active) aging. Thus, by offering players the choice of seemingly frail old women, the games pose fun of the hyper-masculine player-characters and the often militarized settings of earlier games in the same genres. Likewise, by exaggerating the activeness of the "grannies", the games can be seen as humorous comments on current active aging policies and discourses. Whether or not these parodic texts serve to reinforce or challenge existing dominant discourses is a question of reception. However, by mimicking, and yet changing, other discourses the games may be seen to question the very discourses that they refer to.

## 8. OLD WOMEN IN CASUAL GAMES

In their portrayal of the four player-characters, the games reinforce existing understandings of old women as unimportant, old-fashioned, homebound, lonely and child-like. Yet, the old women are simultaneously portrayed as highly capable, active and resisting victimization. In the relation between player and player-character, it is in fact the player who may be left wanting while the old women contain all the potential for progression.

This ambiguity can be understood in several ways. Firstly, it may serve to position the old women of the games as true Others. As such they must carry the burden of simultaneously incorporating the economically productive subject's hopes and fears of aging. In this then, the games and their treatment of old age can be regarded as a testament to Western society's continuing unease with old age and its ultimate prospect of death.

Secondly, the games can be read as parodic texts; humorous comments on both previous digital games as well as on aging. Making equally light of hyper-masculine game characters and the joys of active aging, the four games may serve to reveal the discursiveness of otherwise well-established truths, thereby questioning the texts that they refer to.

*Super granny* and *Granny vs. zombies* with their potential for a final and happy ending may be understood as celebrating the old woman who resists victimization in her insistence on continued agency, even beyond youthful old age. Super Granny does manage to rescue her kittens and bear her nemesis, and Gran resists dehumanization, even at the brink of death. *Angry gran* and *Granny Smith* are less resolvable games and, hence, more open for a pessimistic interpretation where traditional roles for old women are reinforced despite the vigor and capabilities of the two player-characters. The two are, rather, over-capable in ways that isolate them from others. In particular, Angry Gran is left in a limbo of repeated escape attempts from her dull home. Her insubordination

is certainly an act of resistance, but it does not enable any change for the better, only an ever increasing spiral of violence.

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