

Grandma Got Games

Ashley Zeldin | May 2011



The family that plays together stays together.

For Belinda Middleton and her family, playing video games is indeed how they stay together.

The Middleton matriarch plays MMOs and other games with husband Gary, their four grown children and one granddaughter.

“It helps keep us together,” Gary said. “When the kids grow up, start leaving the house and doing things on their own, they don’t spend as much time with you. Gaming now keeps the interaction going. It helps keep us close.”

Though most of the family lives in and around Austin, Texas, second-eldest son Dallas has lived in Madison, Wis. for three years since joining Raven Software as a designer. He and his mother play Final Fantasy XIV together and catch up regularly.

“It’s just been the easiest way for me to be in contact with my family,” Dallas said. “We’ll be playing and I’ll just give mom updates on what happens with my life. It’s better than a phone call.”

Playing games together became the standard mode of contact for Dallas upon moving outside Dallas to attend Texas A&M University-Commerce and later The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University, where he earned his certificate in digital game development with a specialization in level design.

“The trend has been MMOs because we can all play those together as a family,” said Dallas, 29. “I was in college when World of Warcraft came out, and we would play together. It was really a way for us to have family time with me not being there, and that’s continued since.”

For the Middletons, game time has always been family time.

“It’s something that we normally do in our family,” Belinda said.

Her first exposure to video games was some three decades ago, playing Frogger on a Timex Sinclair 1000.

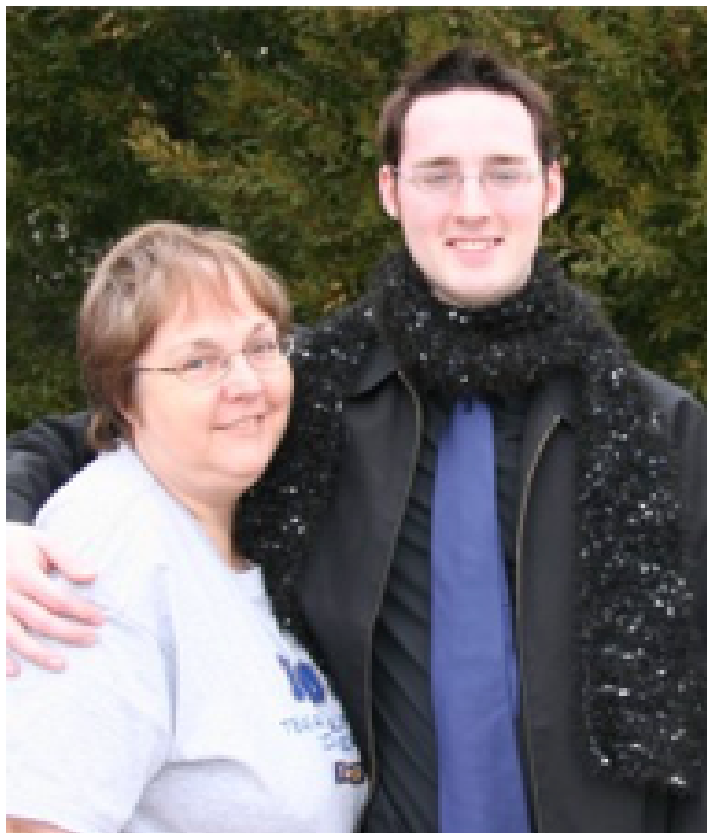
Belinda, now 60, was attracted to the interactivity of games.

“With television and movies, they’re all just coming at you and you can’t respond. With games you can respond,” she explained.

After starting their family, Belinda and Gary played games with their children: eldest son Travis, Dallas, daughter Mia and youngest son Tory.

“If the kids said they were interested in something, we would try to get it,” Belinda said. “We bought used games because that was a more affordable way to do it.”

Dallas remembers watching his mom play Super Mario Brothers 3 for the first time at a Toys 'R' Us.



“So that year for Christmas we magically got an NES,” he recalled. “We spent many nights playing Super Mario Brothers because mom really loved playing it, but she couldn’t get past certain levels, so that’s what her children were for. We would stay up very late some nights.” The next year, Donkey Kong Country came out for Super Nintendo. “So we ended up getting a Super Nintendo.”

There were many late nights, but surprisingly few fights.

“They didn’t have too many family-oriented games back in the day, so we would take turns playing Donkey Kong or Mario,” Dallas said. “I don’t remember there being too many battles about who was going to play.”

“If they would’ve squabbled I would’ve said, ‘well then I’ll just play,’” Belinda added.

She had difficulty with Super Metroid as well, and called upon her children to teach her.

“That always was one of the most frustrating things: teaching mom to play a game,” Dallas admitted. “It’s really difficult because she’s really literal about everything and has to know every single button, but once she gets it she can play

on her own just fine. It's just teaching her how to play the game that's very taxing on me and my other siblings.”

“I played Everquest for four-and-a-half years just fine without you, Dallas!” she interjected.

“Yeah, you had Tory teach you!” he countered.

Now Belinda teaches her 11-year-old granddaughter, Lilliana “Lilly” Thornton, to play WoW.

“When I first started playing WoW I didn't know much about it,” Lilly said. “My grandma teaches me how to play and level up so I can do it on my own later. My grandma helps me on certain quests that I have a hard time doing on my own.”

Belinda runs a family Ventrilo server—dubbed “The ‘Rents’ Vent” by Dallas and his siblings—and talks Lilly through difficult quests.

“I just try to be really patient, and that's why having the vent really helps: you can say, “follow me, this is what we're going to do,”” Belinda said.

Lilly appreciates the family vent server for another reason: “It is fun because it lets you talk to them when you normally wouldn't get to talk to them,” she said of the VoIP integration. “Whenever I play WoW, I get to talk to my grandma and uncles even though I don't actually get to see them much.”

Recent research published in the journal *Communication Research* in February suggests that playing online games indeed can strengthen family communication.

In “Unpacking Time Online: Connecting Internet and Massively Multiplayer Online Game Use With Psychosocial Well-Being”, Dr. Cuihua “Cindy” Shen, an assistant professor of Emerging Media and Communication at the University of Texas, Dallas, and Dr. Dmitri Williams, associate professor in the Annenberg

School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, found that time spent playing MMOs with family members was “beneficial”.

“Even though most people think that spending large amounts of time playing online games can be harmful to one’s social life, if people play online games with their existing friends and family, game play could actually enhance their social experience,” Dr. Shen said. “An online game thus becomes an additional venue, albeit virtual, for socialization.”

Their research, based on a survey of more than 5,000 gamers about their Internet use, virtual world activity and psychosocial well-being, defies a prevailing belief that playing games necessarily leads to decreased social involvement and psychological well-being.

“Not only could the Internet enhance one’s everyday communication with family and friends locally and over a distance, it could also enlarge one’s existing social network by bringing together people with shared interest and values in virtual communities,” Drs. Shen and Williams wrote in the paper.

It’s no wonder. Video games engage 97 percent of teens and 53 percent of adults in the United States, while online games engage 76 percent of teens and 23 percent of adults, Drs. Shen and Williams found; and virtual worlds support more than 45 million accounts in Western societies, with estimates placing the figure two times higher in Asia.

MMOs, too, can “foster informal sociability and cultivate virtual communities,” Dr. Shen said.

Indeed Belinda, who has had mobility issues since a car accident in 2000, enjoys the social life that games afford her.

“Tennis, bicycling and those normal kinds of things that people might do for entertainment are not things that are necessarily doable for me, so the games really help me with being entertained socially,” she said.

She’s involved in various guilds, such as the Slash Panic guild in FFXIV.

Dallas said she’s respected among her peers.

“Mom’s kind of hardcore about it,” he said. “They’re impressed with her.”

His friends and coworkers are, too.

“Everyone thinks she’s the coolest mom because they can’t even fathom playing a game with their parents,” he said. “In school it came up a lot. My friends were just like, ‘Wow, you have the coolest parents ever!’ Even at work people are blown away that I play games with them.”

Belinda particularly has taken notice of more people her age playing games.

“I’ve seen guild names like ‘Old Fogies’,” she said. “I think [the demographics] are expanding at both ends.”

Her age is rarely an issue: “If I’m online and somebody is using language that has finally gotten so offensive I can’t deal with it, I might say something like, ‘Can we clean it up a little bit while we’re doing this?’ And they’re all like, ‘Why is it a problem for you?’ I say, ‘Because I’m a 60-year-old grandmother and I don’t really care to hear it.’ Then they go, ‘You’re that old and you play games?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, and my kids play games and my grandkids play games.’ Then they go, ‘That’s really cool.’”

Dallas thinks that the trend of playing games as a family is growing.

“I know lots of people my age who grew up playing games who play with their children and it’s no big deal,” he said.

Belinda grew up playing board games and card games with her family, and has embraced their digital counterparts.

“Games really provide a vehicle for families to sit down and have fun together,” she said. “It’s downtime, it’s fun time, it’s time when we all like each other—unless you’re beating me in the game.”

It is, however, a challenge to find a video game everyone can agree on.

Belinda doesn’t play first-person shooters because of motion sickness, and opts to play MMOs with Gary. Travis likes fighting games, such as Street Fighter and SoulCalibur. Dallas prefers puzzle games and platformers, Portal in particular. Andrea plays social simulation games like The Sims and Animal Crossing. Tory mostly sticks to strategy games.

“We’re always looking for new games that we can play together,” Belinda said. “That’s why we’re excited when a new MMO comes out. I really like it when more than just Gary and me or Dallas and me play. I like it when we have more family members involved.”

The Middletons don’t limit their social gameplay to MMOs. Lilly plays Kinect and Wii games with her parents and uncles, too.

“She plays those dance games and beats everybody in those,” Belinda said.

For the Middletons, the shared experience and interactivity of games strengthens their bond.

“Whether on the computer or console, I enjoy playing with my wife and my kids whenever I can,” Gary said.

Said Lilly: “Playing games with my family is a fun way to show them I love them.”

Ashley Zeldin (@snidelyhazel) is a freelance writer from Los Angeles. Though her mother convinced her to donate her NES to a local hospital years ago, she kept the Bubble Bobble cartridge. The USC alumna still plays Sonic the Hedgehog on her Sega Game Gear. Her 62-year-old mother has since become a gamer.

<http://newsletter.igda.org/2011/05/23/in-honor-of-mothers-day-grandma-got-games/>