

How video games help successful aging

May 20 2016, by Sanela Osmanovic And Loretta Pecchioni



Gaming makes getting older better, and more fun. Credit: City and County of San Francisco Bandwidth Opportunities Program

Sitting quietly in the corner, we watch a daily family ritual: in the living room awash with soft afternoon light, a six-year-old boy is sitting on the floor, controller in hand, eyes firmly on the television screen. His fingers expertly guide the colorful character in [Skylanders](#), from time to time glancing over his shoulder and grinning at the figure on the sofa, his 68-year-old grandmother.

Perched on the edge of the seat, she follows his game dutifully,

exclaiming and clapping when he finishes a task or meets a challenge, responding with enthusiasm and praise to his frequent inquiries: "Did you see me, Gram?" Every day after school, the two of them do this. Sometimes he plays with friends, but still asks his grandmother to watch. Sometimes he sits calmly on the sofa by her, and they play [Minecraft](#) together. Well, he plays; she watches.

Such a scenario has become common in households across America, with older family members partaking in the gaming activities of the younger generation – and not just watching them play. From 1999 to 2015, the share of American gamers older than 50 [increased from 9 to 27 percent](#). They enjoy the challenge, the fun and especially the social side of playing video games. A major draw is that gaming can be a way to spend [time](#) together with others, including their children and grandchildren.

Our research shows that members of all generations – young and old – view family togetherness as a benefit, and [many play video games with that as a specific purpose](#). They enjoy the games, they enjoy playing, but what they really enjoy is the interaction, which helps to create connections among family members. Better yet, these connections can improve mental and physical well-being and improve relationships, which are all keys to [maintaining a high quality of life as people age](#).

Changing families need to remain connected

[America's population is aging](#), and the world's population of people over 65 is growing quickly: according to the National Institute on Aging, [by 2030 one billion people will be 65 or older](#). Rising life expectancy combined with declining birth rates makes older adults an increasingly large fraction of the world's population, changing the relationships and the structure of family.

Three and even four generations are now likely to share significant parts of their lives, whether living together or separately. As the [numbers of grandparents and great-grandparents increase](#), it becomes more important to form and maintain strong bonds among older and [younger adults](#) in families. As newly independent adolescents become involved in the unforgiving whirlpool of romantic, academic and social activities, family ties take a back seat. The [frequency and intensity of family connections weaken](#), especially with grandparents.

One way to maintain the important intergenerational relationships within families is through shared activities. Spending time in ways that appeal to both sides of the age spectrum also creates closeness to further strengthen connections. Video games are one important way to achieve this.

Playing for togetherness

Through many conversations with families like the one at the start of this story, we found that older adults who regularly play video games with their relatives find the experience enjoyable, fun and, most importantly, bonding. Mainly partaking in casual, social games, they relish the informal daily contact and the common ground gaming creates between them and their children and grandchildren.

"Time together, and something that is just ours, that just the two of us do," one 63-year-old told us, explaining why she plays video games with her granddaughter. "It is like a secret language when we talk about it in front of the rest of the family, something that ties us. I feel like I have been more a part of my granddaughter's life now that we get to do something closer to her generation."

Younger adults, in turn, play video games with older family members mainly as a means of maintaining or deepening their relationships. In

most cases, they carefully select the games based on their family member's perceived interests and abilities. When playing with friends, they typically focus on games with higher levels of control complexity or story involvement, such as [Call of Duty](#) or [World of Warcraft](#). But when playing with [older adults](#) they select "exergames" such as [Dance Dance Revolution](#) or app games such as [Words with Friends](#), meeting the perceived necessity for simple controls, as well as outcomes beyond mere enjoyment, such as physical or mental exercise.

They use the gaming to spend time together, to connect and to talk about both simple and complex topics in a setting they find comfortable and comforting. "Playing helps me talk to my dad more, because I don't have the luxury of going home every week," one 19-year-old man told us. "So, playing online games together helps me in continuation of the bond I have with my dad."

Regardless of age, the ability to stay connected through gaming is the most prominent motive for playing. For the young, playing simple, casual games that do not necessarily excite them is still a good way to feel the comfort of family. For the old, working through frustrations of learning to use new technologies is a small price to pay to actively participate in the lives of their children and grandchildren. The results are happiness and enjoyment stemming from the bonding, the conversations, the feelings of being closer to loved ones and even maintaining relationships across distances.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: How video games help successful aging (2016, May 20) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-05-video-games-successful-aging.html>

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