

Life with the Romeros



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John and Brenda Romero are undeniably the power couple of the games development world. James Batchelor caught up with the duo to find out how they balance their home life and work in games

In December 1987, John Romero was working late at New Hampshire studio Origin Systems.

He was happily coding away when COO Robert Garriott, brother of Richard Garriott, asked him for help getting the latest Ultima running on an Apple II in preparation for a visit from Sir-Tech. The studio was bringing over a demo of the new Wizardry

game, and with them was Brenda Garno – the woman who would later become his wife.



“John and I have this dynamic duo thing,” Brenda tells Develop when thinking back to how they first hit it off. “We both really like board games, we’ve been in the industry for a long time, but also neither one of us drinks. So what ended up happening is, when we went to conferences, we would just end up hanging out – and this happened for years.”

So how do you go from being friends in the ‘80s to being a couple?

“I was doing a Masters thesis on game designers,” Brenda explains. “I decided to move away from board games and focus on video game designers. I picked John because he’d done this huge range of games. Obviously he had the most success with his FPS titles, but he’d worked on a ton of different games. So I wanted to interview him and understand his level design style.

“Over the process of interviewing him every day, talking to him for about an hour every day, we got to know each other outside of games. We decided to start dating. The funny thing that happened is that, when we went to GDC after that, there were tons of people who were unaware that we hadn’t been a couple before.”

The passion the pair share for games – both board and video – has become the bedrock of their relationship, just as it was for their friendship before.

Understandably so: John Romero was something of a child prodigy, dabbling in development at just 11 years old before turning professional at 15. Similarly, Brenda was designing games at just 15. As she puts it: “It’s truly all we’ve both ever done.”

'OUR LIFE IS GAMES'

You would think it might be difficult for the couple to avoid falling into the chasm of ‘all work and no play’ – and you’d be right. When we ask how they maintain a work/life balance, John simply replies: “There isn’t one.”



“Our whole life is games,” he says. “We don’t even act differently around the kids. This is all we do: make games and talk about games. The kids all play games, and have even started developing them. I mean, they’re normal kids; they still read, play outside, hang out with their friends. They have to be doing other things to have content to feed their creative engine.

“We own our company together, we get up and walk to work together. We work all day and then come home to see the kids.”

Brenda adds: “If it felt like work, I would be more keen to shut that off from time to time, and not think about games for a while. That’s not to say that doesn’t happen; sometimes I want to talk about anything but games.

"I sometimes joke that I had to be in the industry 30 years in order to survive as the wife of John Romero. But there's such a shared interest. I love that at three o'clock in the morning, we've had really ridiculous conversations about exponential and logarithmic functions in experience curves. These conversations can last an hour – and there's no other spouse who would say: 'That's amazing, that's an interesting point.'"

"When we went to GDC after we started dating, there were people who were unaware we hadn't been a couple before."



Of course, John's dedication to his games can shake up the family routine somewhat. If he's keen to fix or perfect something in a project, he'll often spend more time at work than he realises – something Brenda keeps a close eye on.

“If John's in level-building mode, he could die if no-one shows up at the office to feed him,” she says. “I'll remind him he has to be home to spend time with the kids. The second they go to sleep, he can go right back – providing he makes sure that the kids don't feel deprived as a result of having games developer parents.

“Sometimes that means that he's got to work Saturdays and Sundays, but the office is set up so that we can have a Minecraft marathon with the kids there.”

John adds: “The kids love going to the office. There's consoles, computers, and everything.”

A major advantage, of course, is that this shared passion for games and game design means the Romeros support each other throughout their endeavours – something Brenda takes particularly close to heart.

“I will encourage him whenever I can,” she says. “Sometimes John goes back to the office to work after the kids have gone to bed. I support that, because I love the stuff he creates.

“And he supports me. There's nothing as good as being able to share your deepest love with somebody and have them look into the same little obscure glass with 35 years of games industry experience and say ‘I get it'. It's worth its weight in something far more valuable than gold.”

COUPLE AND PARTNERS

When two people are creating in the same area competition must be a danger, but both Romeros say this has never affected them – although Brenda observes with a smile that her best game (Wizardy) has become less well known than John's worst (Daikatana).

However, things truly heat up when it comes to playing games.

"We've had really ridiculous conversations at three o'clock in the morning about exponential and logarithmic functions in experience curves."

"For years, we had about nine games going at once – not just video games, but life games," says John. "Like our 'have fun' game. If one of us says 'have fun' to you first, we get the point. If you say it, we both lose but the first person to say 'thanks' wins. You basically trash us if you say 'have fun'."

The pair are, as you would expect, "ferociously competitive" when playing video games. Brenda still bests John at Ghost Recon, but cannot come close to him on Doom – no surprises there.



"In Doom, I've killed him twice – once was a lucky shot, the other was a telefrag," she says. "That counts!"

“But John is garbage at Drop7 and I’ve had the high score now for years. I got it even higher, but he’s still feverishly playing. He hasn’t accepted it.

“This is how bad it gets: I even tried to take a hit out on John. I got a pro player, a really famous one, to take him on – and John still fucking beat him. It was first to 50, and they were pretty close up to around 35 points. Then John ‘patterned’ this player. He works out your pattern, the routes you take through the level – it was a beautiful murder festival all the way up to 50.”



A FAMILY OF DEVS

Spend any amount of time with the Romeros and you'll soon learn how infectious their enthusiasm for game design can be. So it comes as no surprise that their children – six of them – have been inspired to lay the groundwork for a career in the industry.

“We're in a beautiful situation as a family where everybody's involved,” Brenda explains. “The whole family takes part in whatever it is we're doing, to whatever extent they can. The youngest kids might just be playing the games but they feel like a vested part of it. And that's amazing.”

John tells us about their eldest, Michael. Once a keen football player, his love for RPGs and games led him to try developing in Flash.

“When he finally got out of high school, he basically decided he was done with sports and wanted to get in the games industry,” says John. “So he got a degree and became a 3D graphics game programmer. He's been in the industry for seven years, worked at several companies and he's now an awesome programmer, extremely driven. That just comes from him deciding this was what he wanted to do.”

One of the youngest, Donovan expressed an interest in coding when he was six years old, so John told him he had to “nail reading”.

“You have to learn how to read before you can code, because there's a lot of words involved,” he says. “Minecraft really made him want to learn how to read, because when we all play at the same time, we're talking to each other through chat and when he was four or five, he'd really want to know what we're saying.”

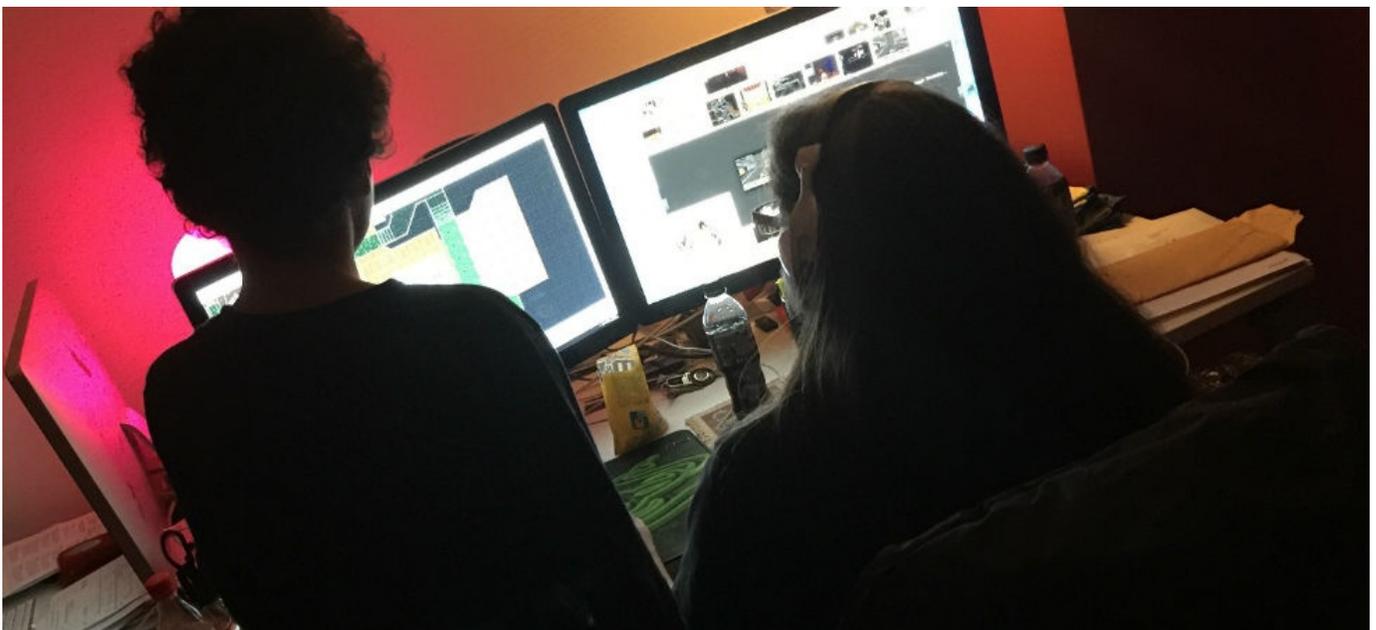
While Donovan was still not old enough to code, he did write out an 87-page game design document in a notebook, encompassing everything from level layouts to UI. When he showed his parents the finished design, Brenda says they did what any self-respecting parents would: held a launch party.

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"He's probably the best example of what a kid looks like when they're totally raised in a game dev environment," she says. "He comes up with an idea, and we're 100 per cent behind him. John's doing programming lessons with Donovan now – they even film it and release them on Vimeo."

"One of my favourite moments was when he told me about a name he'd come up with for his game. He said, 'Mommy, you may not know what this means because it's Spanish: Diablo'. I had to tell him it was already taken and he was devastated. The beautiful thing is two weeks later, he met David Brevik and started telling him his ideas for his version of the game."

"We don't talk to him like everything's cute, either. If he thinks one of his ideas is interesting, we ask him why and what would make it good as gameplay. He even talks like a game developer, referencing core loops and so on."



IDEAL RELATIONSHIP

It's not just the boys, either. 15-year-old Maezza is becoming an avid coder and Brenda is looking forward to working on a game with her this summer – “a lifelong dream of mine,” the proud mother says. In fact, the whole Romero family is attending a game jam hosted in a Swedish castle this year and will be working on a game together.

A career in games design is by no means mandatory in the Romero family. 17-year-old Lillia is actually more interested in singing – the other hereditary talent in the family. John's father was a professional singer and, according to Brenda, “John could just have easily gone into metal instead of games”.

“Whatever our kids' creative passions are, we'll support them 100 per cent,” she adds.

For other dev couples out there, John and Brenda offer the following advice: figure out how you're going to work together as well as live together. Ask yourself how you would resolve any kind of conflict – while the Romeros have had design-based disagreements, they confidently claim they've never had a full-blown argument.

“The rivalry between us makes things interesting, because it helps us design games,” John smiles. “We can see what gets people competing.”

Most importantly, says Brenda, make sure you're with someone that shares your passions.

“John and I have such an unbelievably amazing relationship,” she says. “We're best friends. If I had to go through everything in my life that sucked to get to where we are now, I would do it twice.

“Of course, it would have been great if he'd just said in 1987: ‘Hey, you're cute, want to get married?’”

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