

Gen Y Speaks: Why this online game I have been playing two-thirds of my life means so much to me



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Raj Nadarajan / TODAY

Among other things, RuneScape has taught the author how to navigate social relations.

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If, like me, you grew up in the noughties, chances are you would have heard of RuneScape.

It is a mediaeval-fantasy multiplayer online role-playing game which took the world by storm upon its 2001 release.

I created my first account in 2006, when I was just nine years old.

Who could forget the quintessential 2000s kid experience of rushing madly through your homework so that you would be allowed to play on the family computer?

Nearly 15 years later, my peers have moved on to more modern, flashy titles, but I'm still clicking pixels in this plodding 20-year old game.

Now that I've graduated, I have the autonomy to play a bit more — a couple of hours each night, more on weekends.



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So my relationship with RuneScape isn't an addictive one. It's more of a stable, lasting commitment.

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What's this relationship built on?

Having spinal muscular atrophy, a neurological condition which causes me to lose muscle control, makes playing video games hard.

I lack the manual dexterity required to use game controllers and keyboards. My reaction times aren't great either. These limitations rule out a huge swathe of games.

But RuneScape is incredibly easy for me to play. Most actions are performed by mouse clicks, and the game largely proceeds at a sedate pace.

There are many other reasons why RuneScape will always be special to me.

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In the game, I take on a wide variety of activities, improving or "levelling up" the associated skills as I go.

I can fish, chop wood, cook, grow crops, breed animals, run obstacle courses, brew potions, and of course, fight a dizzying array of monsters.

There's a lot that I can't do in real life because of my disability, but the game lets me experience some of these things vicariously through my avatar, from doing parkour to scooping animal dung into buckets (yes, you read that right).

It's such a rush to see my avatar leap effortlessly across ledges and climb sheer cliffs. I can almost believe I'm doing it for real.

I enjoy the more mundane aspects of the game too.

Fishing is seen by many RuneScape players to be one of the most boring things to do. All you do is click on a patch of fish in the water and wait for your avatar to catch something.

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But I love it because of how at peace it makes me feel, especially if I've had a stressful day.

I have spent hundreds of hours just watching my avatar standing by the water catching lobsters or reeling in magnificent sailfish, while chatting with fellow fishermen from all around the world.

Through these chats, I learn about what life is like in other countries — a godsend because being medically unfit to travel, I risk becoming a frog in the well.

I'll always remember a conversation with someone from America one New Year's Eve.



“Shootin’ ’coons” was his reply. It turned out that he and his brother loved taking their guns into a nearby forest and hunting raccoons for sport.

We don’t do this sort of thing in Singapore so I found it rather fascinating.

From my British friends, I also learned that some of them really do refer to lunch — the midday meal — as “dinner”, just like in the Enid Blyton books I read as a child!

RuneScape has taught me many other things which are applicable in real life, such as patience and persistence.

This is because in the game, you have to repeat the same tasks over and over again for hours to make progress.

This isn’t for everyone, but I personally enjoy it and find it relaxing. It has also trained me to keep working consistently at my goals and to break down those deemed too big and daunting into smaller, more manageable chunks.

RuneScape also taught me to navigate social relations.

I’ll be honest: I don’t get out much and socialising isn’t something I particularly enjoy, mainly because of the physical strain such outings put on my body.

So my social skills are passable at best.

But RuneScape allows me to encounter all kinds of people and learn to deal with them — including some unsavoury characters, teaching me valuable life lessons about the tricky social world and the messy, complicated people who live in it.

I lost my first account — the one I made in 2006 — within a couple of years to a scammer who claimed that if I typed my password backwards in the chat box, it would be censored out and appear as asterisks.

Gullible me tried it, and of course my password appeared in all its uncensored glory for the world to see, gifting the scammer access to my account.

What can I say? I wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. But that experience made me slightly less dull, as I realised I couldn’t just naively believe everything that anyone told me.

On the flip side, the best thing RuneScape has given me is my closest friend, whom I met in the game but have since gotten to know on a more personal level outside it.

I suppose this is quite a Gen Y/Z thing, being comfortable enough to share your life with an Internet friend you’ll never meet — being American, she’s literally on the opposite side of the planet.

Despite being a couple of years younger than me, she is far more mature and independent than I could ever hope to be, having not led the comfortable, sheltered life I’ve been blessed with.

And it shows in the life lessons she has taught me.

Once, she called out another player for toxic behaviour and bullying others while I chose the non-confrontational route and pretended not to know what was happening.

Although I avoided a fight, when I reflected on this incident later, I admired her bravery to speak up for her convictions.

Because of my lack of exposure to the social world, others have described me in quite negative terms as I didn't know how to leave a good first impression.

It used to get me down, but she taught me to be confident in myself — that I should love me for being me, even if seemingly nobody else does. That we should be happy in our own skin and not feel pressured to be who we're not, just to conform to what society expects.

I think her willingness to be my friend, through all my social ineptitude, speaks volumes.

Not everyone may find me likeable at first, but there are people out there — like her — who eventually will.

And I'm okay with that now — I won't let it dent my sense of self-worth any longer.

Nine-year-old me could never have imagined that clicking "Play" for the very first time all those years ago would lead to this.

But I have developed so much as a person — psychologically, mentally, and socially — thanks to RuneScape and the people that inhabit its weird and wonderful virtual world.

I wouldn't have it any other way, because what better way is there to learn life skills and expand my worldview than through a video game, where the stakes aren't as high and there's fun to be had at the same time?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jonathan Tiong, 23, has just graduated from the National University of Singapore where he majored in Communications and New Media. He will be starting work in a public relations role in April 2021.

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