

The Runescape Lifers

Security are scratching their heads over how to search them. Cosplay is one thing, but the two sword-toting armour-clad cosplayers strutting proudly toward the Battersea Evolution venue are something else entirely. One's wearing a standard but nevertheless impressive suit of armour, while the other's decked out in aged bronze seemingly styled after Cthulhu. They stick out like, well, like turquoise knights in London. Yet they also fit right in, because today, the venue is filled with thousands of people, men and women young and old, who all share the same hobby: Runescape.

You remember Runescape, developer Jagex's offbeat MMORPG about killing cows and burning shrimp and even some other things. At least, I assume you remember it. Everyone else does. Obviously, everyone at Runefest, the game's annual convention, loves Runescape, but critically they also remember it. All the people I speak to, the players and personalities and content creators, say and do exactly the same thing when I ask them why they love Runescape, why they've been playing it for over 10 years, often well over half their lives.

It always starts with a small smile and a flustered "I don't know". They've never really thought about it. They just kept playing, they say. But then they hit upon a word. They look down modestly and laugh. Then their smile widens and they look up, beaming with the same joyful pride that carried those cosplayers through London's no-doubt confused crowds.

"I love it because it's my childhood."

It's fitting, then, that the theme of this year's Runefest was "going back to your roots". But even before I arrive at the event, I see how this game has impacted and enriched the lives of its players.

A few weeks before Runefest, I chat with Adam "B0aty" Lyne, the biggest Old School Runescape Twitch streamer. Old School Runescape is the Runescape you remember. In 2012 it was supplanted by a dramatic update which totally changed and ultimately split Runescape, with the emerging game colloquially known as Runescape 3. Happily, what many people consider the true Runescape returned in 2013 with the launch of Old School servers. But like almost everyone at Runefest, Lyne started playing well before that.

"It was October 16, 2003, so I was about eight years old," he says, recalling a date he's clearly committed to memory. "[My brothers] found out about it from some TV program, I don't know what it was. They were playing, I was watching them play it, and they told me to make an account."

Fast forward 14 years and you'll find Lyne making a comfortable living playing Runescape for a live audience. His Old School Twitch streams regularly draw thousands of viewers, and during major game events and updates, he pulls in tens of thousands. Lyne got into content

creation through YouTube in 2006, and saw the potential to turn his love of Runescape into a career in 2015 during his first year at university. So he gave up his cushy scholarship and dropped out to pursue streaming.

"For the first time ever, I was questioning myself. Could I do this full-time? At this point there weren't any full-time Runescape streamers at all. I think I was the first one to pursue it. I spoke to my parents about it - it took me three or four days to make the decision - and my parents both agreed. I had the support of my parents, I could tell it was what I really wanted to do, I just wanted to give it a go. I dropped out on 9th January 2015 to pursue it and now, two-and-a-half years later, I'm still doing it and it's going far better than I ever planned."

Lyne's success is largely a function of his charisma and effort - throughout 2017 he's streamed a minimum of five hours every day - and also his philanthropy. Through charity streams and personal donations, Lyne has raised tens of thousands of pounds for Macmillan Cancer Support alone, to say nothing of a dozen other charities he's aided in bursts. Even so, Lyne was hungry for more ways to give back. After winning a Golden Gnome - the Runefest equivalent of a Grammy - for his charity efforts, he decided to try helping the Old School community as well.

"There are other people who want to be streamers, and I was like, 'right, I've been here for five, six years now, I can now use my position as one of the top streamers to help out other Runescape streamers.' Not to help them pick up the ropes, but just to put them on the map if I think they're very good streamers.

"When I won that Gnome, I decided to take it a bit further. I set up a stream team called Connection Lost. What I normally did was, when I ended a stream, I'd use a Twitch program called hosting, where I'd host another stream and it would send all my viewers over to that stream and put their viewer count near the top, which gives them a lot of publicity. People would see them near the top, they'd click the stream. "I realised that only works once a day when I end my livestream, so when I set up Connection Lost, I set it to do auto hosting, meaning whenever I'm not streaming, it will be hosting anyone in that team who's live at the time. I aim to put in hard-working streamers who I think have a lot of potential and deserve more success. It's helped a lot of people in the past and I'd like to try to keep it going."

Once Connection Lost members hit certain viewership milestones, they "graduate," move on and open their chair up to another up-and-coming streamer. To give team graduates a final push, Lyne donates them sizable sums of money - money pulled from the sponsorships on his stream.

"You get sponsorships where you're paid to advertise a brand on your stream," he explains. "It's something I didn't really delve into until August 2016. We took our first sponsor, and what we did was donate 100 per cent of the money that we made from that sponsor - and it was a lot of money we were paid - away to streamers and to charities. I sent a chunk of it, I think 55 or 60 percent, straight to Macmillan Cancer Support. And the other 40 percent we distributed

out to lots of different streamers. You donate a streamer some money, they can put that money toward upgrading their setup and coming across as more professional. It was just a chance to help people out.

"I'm very comfortable with where I stand on how much I'm making, so I'm not really too greedy about it. But then I realised, in a way, I was just throwing all this money away that was generated from nowhere. And I was like 'why don't we take this, get this money, and then just give it all away?' So that's when we did that, and the results were really nice. And we're planning to do it more whenever sponsors pop up."

"We." Over and over, Lyne refers to his channel as some nebulous plural. Apart from his candidness, this serves to illustrate the sense of community behind Lyne and Old School Runescape's rise on Twitch.

For starters, mutual nostalgia aside, Runescape players have something else in common: they play an unabashedly grindy game. In-game milestones can take days or weeks to achieve, so players are always looking for something to watch or listen to in order to ease the grind. Old School streams became the perfect fix, something streamer Knightenator, one of the standout women in the Old School streaming scene, is keenly aware of. (Note: Knightenator and several other interviewees asked to be addressed by their player names in this article.)

"A lot of the stuff you do is some sort of grind, so you need some motivation," she says. "People come into my chat like, 'how do I get to this level?' or, 'I'm trying to get through this grind, what do you recommend?' And I just tell them to watch streams. It will inspire you and distract you. Most of the time, whatever you're doing as a streamer, you can spend a lot of the time focusing on chat, whereas with other games you have to completely ignore that. Old School streams are based on interaction, so the community is incredibly loyal."

Motivation really is the operant word, isn't it? Never mind a weekly goal, how could you play the same game for so long? I was drained after putting 100 hours into Persona 5. What keeps people coming back to Runescape for years?

For people like Knightenator, it's an emotional connection.

"This is going to sound ridiculous and cheesy and a little bit cringe, but there's just something that's really comforting to me because I played it so much in my childhood," she says.

"My childhood was a bit all over the place, and Runescape was the one thing I could always go to for escapism. Although I'm not in the same situation now, anytime I feel a bit, well, anything really, happy or sad or whatever, Runescape is the place I go to."

For others, such as streamers Faux and MMORPGRS, it's about mastering the game. Old School is the same as it's always been, but it's also constantly evolving. Far from getting bored, players are always looking for new ways to push systems past their breaking point, to

do things Jagex never intended them to. Training methods and combat techniques are discovered, recorded and shared like archaeological finds, with the finder's name going down in history.

Jagex has also refreshed Runescape with radical new modes. Ironman players, for example, can't trade with other players, so they need to do everything themselves. Hardcore Ironman mode takes this one step further with the addition of simulated permadeath - your account isn't lost on death, but you lose your hardcore status if you lose your one life. Faux and MMORPGRS specialise in modes like these and also play Deadman Mode, a cutthroat PvP mode where anyone can fight anyone, anywhere, and death means losing your hard-earned levels and the most valuable items from your bank. In fact, in the week leading up to Runefest, they and eight other streamers lived and played in the same lavish house, the Deadman Mansion, as part of a community event funded by Jagex.

"Last week [Jagex] flew us out, most of us got here on Saturday or Sunday. rspi had two different mansions. I was on the opposite team [of MMORPGRS]," Faux explains, seated feet from his smirking rival. "It was one week of fighting against each other, doing different challenges, doing riddles on stream, different competitions for points to earn our team stuff and better ourselves for the finale."

"A lot of the time we were grinding in our rooms, so we weren't experiencing the mansion so much," MMORPGRS adds. "But it was nice to have all these other streamers around. It's so much more motivating."

Other lifelong Runescape players seek out new ways to test themselves. One player, Woox, is known for the record-setting boss attempts he puts on YouTube, and was even honoured for them at Runefest. I bump into him on the show floor, and he tells me that tougher fights are his muse.

"New content is what keeps me going," he says. "I can do a lot of new stuff, lots of good challenges. A lot of the methods I use in my videos, they have a cycle. And it's a perfect cycle. You have to do it exactly the way I did. If you [make one mistake], it's game over. You die instantly. I continue playing because I want to push my skill and continue playing my challenges. I want to make them harder and harder and see how far I can go."

Another beloved YouTuber, known simply as A Friend, is of a similar mind. He puts out progress videos sharing his grinds and achievements, and hundreds of thousands hungrily tune in.

"If you set goals, it becomes really fun to play," he says. "There was a week where I didn't play Runescape because there was nothing to do, but then I thought about putting [a high-level item] in my house, which requires lots of grinding. Then I spent three days getting supplies and money and leveling up, and it was fun. It becomes very fun because you're trying to complete the goal."

No matter their reason for playing, Runescape lifers are united by time-tested nostalgia. As I bumble wide-eyed around the Runefest show floor, drinking in replicas of Varrock and Lumbridge and all the other in-game cities I whiled away my high school years on, the diversity of the players I meet is matched only by the consistency of their sentiments. A mother and daughter cosplay pair, an elderly woman in a powered wheelchair, parents together with their toddlers, shy teens and rowdy 20-somethings - they get along swimmingly because they're all here simply for Runescape.

Runescape is at once a phenomenon and a ghost. Seemingly everyone has fond memories of playing it when they were younger, but for one reason or another moved on from or simply forgot about it. Yet miraculously, and ever so quietly, it's still going. And thriving, to hear the lifers tell it. Which is terrible news for me, because frankly I don't know that I have another 5000 hours to spare. And to the bane of my calendar, there's one more thing all Runescape lifers know.