

Player Democracy in *Old School RuneScape*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cambridge-based developer Jagex released *Old School RuneScape* (OSRS) in 2013, following years of backlash to the direction of the long-running MMORPG *RuneScape* (2001). OSRS opened its servers alongside the main game based on a 2007 backup, effectively removing six years of updates. OSRS overtook the average player count of *RuneScape* in 2016 and the gap has only increased in the years since. But the game has not remained stagnant. Indeed, OSRS has now had more years of development (2013–2025) than *RuneScape* had had up until the 2007 backup (2001–2007).

To try to maintain the ‘old school spirit’ of the game – and in response to a lack of trust in Jagex that had led to the dissatisfaction in the main game in the first place – OSRS is updated according to an unusual form of player democracy. Jagex propose updates and players vote ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to their implementation. A proposed update requires a supermajority of ‘yes’ votes (75% until 2022, 70% thereafter) to be implemented. This means that both developers and players alike actively campaign for or against proposed or potential updates to the game.

I examine player attitudes towards OSRS’ voting system and what this may entail for the potential future of player democracy in other contexts. I do this via a qualitative content analysis following Udo Kuckartz and Stefan Rädiker (2023). I will scrape the comment trees of 20 relevant threads in the game’s quasi-official forum, the subreddit */r/2007scape*, and inductively code the posts. This will establish a number of themes, strands of thinking regarding how players perceive the voting system and how they negotiate their position in the player democracy. The data will be gathered and coded in February and March 2025. The presentation will then consist of my preliminary analyses, broader theoretical considerations and the potential benefits and problems with player democracy more widely applied.

Player democracy is rare in digital games – certainly on the scale of OSRS. The intuitive reason why it is not common is the risk of developer work being ‘wasted’ after failure to secure player approval. The Sailing skill was an example of this, being proposed in 2015, developed fairly extensively, only to receive 68% ‘yes’ votes – an over-two-thirds majority, yet still not reaching the threshold. The skill was scrapped, and only reemerged as a serious proposal in 2023, totally redesigned. On the other hand, I hypothesise that a meaningful player democracy makes for a playerbase that feels more engaged and invested in and more valued by the game’s development.

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There is little research into this kind of player democracy. A closely related topic would be *co-creation* in digital games, “the change of the design of existing games through participation in the production of the game by players” (Prax 2016, 36). OSRS’ voting system could constitute co-creation under Prax’s definition. However, so far, research in this area has focused on player co-creation in the form of mods (Reisinho, Raposo, and Zagalo 2024), in-game tools to produce new content (Kohler et al. 2011) or in the design of a game prior to release (De Jans et al. 2017). OSRS offers a model for a different kind of co-creation, if player democracy is to be understood as a kind of co-creation.

Studying player democracy may also help to better understand how players understand and relate to their position as players, fans, community members and consumers. This is because discussions surrounding polling appear to often become meta-discussions about what the core philosophy of the game is or should be (‘old school-ness’) (Ford 2020), how Jagex can build and maintain trust with the community, what the point of the polling system is, its benefits and drawbacks, and the practicalities of game development.

I will also consider the specifics of OSRS and its position as a long-running MMORPG that created a ‘classic’ version, akin to the later *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment 2019). OSRS was one of the first MMORPGs in what has become a trend. Research has so far focused on *World of Warcraft Classic* and on the concept of nostalgia (Robinson and Bowman 2022; Toft-Nielsen 2019). The aspect of nostalgia may also apply here in the perceived need to define and vociferously protect ‘old school-ness’, making it a more emotionally charged subject or making ‘old school-ness’ more dependent on one’s own nostalgia for the *RuneScape*-that-was prior to OSRS.

The presentation will therefore focus on a preliminary theoretical situating of the coded dataset through the lenses of co-creation in the broad sense, and of ‘classic’ MMORPGs more specifically. This will help to better understand what aspects of OSRS’ player democracy can and cannot be potentially extrapolated to wider game design practices.

Keywords

player democracy, co-creation, voting, MMORPG, *Old School RuneScape*

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