

The refugee who turned game designer

- 1 Lual Mayen was 12 years old when he saw a computer for the first time. Standing in a queue at a UN registration centre in a refugee camp in Northern Uganda, he was fascinated by the device and thought it must have fallen from heaven. He pleaded with his mother for one, but she could barely afford enough food to feed her family, how could she possibly buy a laptop?!
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- 2 Lual's mother, Nyantet Daruka, single-handedly trekked 250 miles to refuge with her children and gave birth to Lual on the way. Working as a seamstress in the camp, Nyantet secretly saved her income for years, to give her son 300 dollars to buy a laptop. Lual cried when he received his gift. "I did not have a lot of opportunities until my mother invested in me, she saw something in me." Lual was determined to not waste his mother's sacrifice. For three years, he walked three hours every day, to an internet cafe to charge his laptop and three hours back. Through online tutorials, he taught himself English, how to code and design programmes.
 - 3 When Lual first began making games, he wanted something that the children could play in the refugee camp. And in August 2016, he designed his first game, 'Salaam', the Arabic word for peace. With no internet in camp, it was only 12 MB/s in size, so it could be shared from mobile to mobile via Bluetooth. Lual posted his game on Facebook and it went viral. He was soon invited to speak at gaming conferences across the world and put in contact with industry professionals. The success of his game launched his career and brought him to America. Now, at the age of 27, Lual lives in a trendy neighbourhood in Washington DC and is the CEO of Junub Games. "Junub is an Arabic word that means people of the South because I'm from South Sudan. I have to create something in the game industry that relates to my people," he said.
 - 4 Junub Games focuses on creating mobile games that are aimed at peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Later this year, Lual will be releasing a new version of Salaam, where he will put the player in the shoes of a refugee. "I wish we lived in a world where 18 but that's why I created my game. It's a game that is more than about just being a refugee, it's about (understanding) the journey that they have been through," he stated. Junub Games has teamed up with various NGOs¹⁾ so

that when a player makes in-app purchases of food, water and medicine for their character, they are actually buying resources for someone living in a refugee camp.

- 5 In 2021, Lual founded the Lual Mayen Foundation to empower refugees through technology. In July, the international gaming company Unity Technologies donated 50,000 dollars to fund a tech centre in the refugee camp Lual grew up in. Working in conjunction with Uganda's Ministry of Education, the centre will provide programmes to enable refugees to gain employment in the technology and computer engineering industries.
- 6 "One thing I always say is talent is evenly distributed and opportunities are not. I wouldn't be where I am today if my mother had not given me something that actually changed my life and now I want to help others too," Lual said.

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noot 1 NGO = Non-Governmental Organisation: onafhankelijke hulporganisatie