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Just when Jesse Cross was thinking there might be not be a place for him in the interactive virtual gaming space his brothers are so enjoying, the creative teenager came up with an idea that not only provided an innovative solution, it landed him the promise of his first paying job.

Jesse, 17, who has autism and is supported by the NDIS, feels he's too mature for Minecraft, a game which his younger brother Alexander loves. He also struggles emotionally with the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) game his older brother Zach enjoys.

Both Alexander, 14, and Zach, 21, who also have autism and are NDIS participants, access the virtual gaming programs through their NDIS funding with a company called Minds at Play (MAP).

The start-up provider launched early in the pandemic to support kids and young adults with autism and other disabilities to learn communication and social skills through interactive online games.

From four players in mid-2020, it has grown to support more than 200 players around the country.

"The boys both love it, they find it a fantastic way to communicate and meet other people like themselves, in the safe environment of our home and (they) plan on continuing until the end of time I think," says the boys' mum, Tegan.

"It's amazing for their confidence, their social skills and for making friends. They're talking to other kids with disabilities their age, they're making friendships, learning how to communicate with other people. They're learning while they're having fun."

Tegan discovered the programs at a Berri Barmera online Expo hosted by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to help people in the South Australian Riverlands region connect with providers by offering new social and community participation supports, tailored to the local community.

"It's a struggle to find ways to spend NDIS money in a rural area that fits the boys' goals and helps them grow and improve their way, so that's why I went to this Expo," Tegan says. "By far the program that stuck out the most was Minds at Play.

We encouraged our boys to have a go and both Xander and Zach love it."

But for Tegan's middle son, Jesse, the programs on offer weren't quite the right fit.

“D&D and Minecraft are not really my perspective,” says Jesse, who is in his final year of school and describes himself as a “Gamer, Coder, Streamer Person”.

“I felt kind of bored because I couldn’t do anything and my brothers were having all the attention, I felt a bit left out”. So, Jesse began thinking about a solution.

He wondered if Minds at Play might consider running a program through Scratch – the virtual coding space where Jesse enjoys using his great coding skills to create and play his own custom-built games with other like-minded people.

“Scratch is basically a children's coding-based game-maker,” Jesse says. “I like the flexibility it gives me, it’s a lot more interesting for me.”

At first, it seemed Jesse might code and play alongside others. But then he took his pitch further.

“Jesse came to us and told us, ‘I am good at Scratch, I know how to teach this thing and this is something I can do!’ Minds at Play director and co-founder, Dwayne Fernandes recalls. “Being then 16 and pitching an idea like this to us, that is pretty spectacular.”

Fast forward a few months and Jesse is now putting the finishing touches on lesson plans for a Scratch program he will teach – and be paid for - during the next school holidays.

“I’m anxious and nervous, but also very pumped!” Jesse says.

Not only is Jesse anticipating his first pay cheque, his coding lessons will also contribute credits towards his high school leaving certificate, the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).

Jesse’s high school has jumped on board to support Jesse’s endeavour with valuable feedback and teaching lesson-planning skills.

“If we didn’t have NDIS plans, the boys would never have met Minds at Play and Jesse would not have this amazing opportunity,” Tegan says.

“We are so grateful for the NDIS support and how it is supporting Jesse and all of our children.”

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