



# TSHEPISO MALEMA

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## WE WANT YOUNG PEOPLE'S DREAMS TO BE UNLOCKED THROUGH GAMING AND VIRTUAL REALITY.

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**Tshepiso Malema** was 15 when he set up **Gamer's Territory**, a place for young people to meet and play computer games, in Ivory Park, a Johannesburg township in South Africa. He then went on to set up **Tshepiso Malema Speaks**, a motivational platform to help young people achieve their dreams. He explains how his drive to support others set him on his entrepreneurial journey.

### Why did you study information systems at the University of Pretoria?

At first, I wanted to study computer science, but, in South Africa, your grades determine which course you can take, and my grades weren't good enough. So, I did some research and came across information systems at the University of Pretoria. When I read the course description and saw that it was a combination of entrepreneurship and IT, I thought, "Wow, this is what I should be doing!" At that point, the idea of studying computer science left me, and here I am, studying information systems and really enjoying it. Not having the grades I thought I needed was a blessing in disguise.

### How do you stay motivated to learn?

The fear of failure keeps me motivated. My mom always tells me that I'm the one who will change our family situation. If I'm lazy and unmotivated, that means I'm ruining others' futures.

In 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown, I only had three months of face-to-face contact with my teachers. The rest of the time, I was studying on my own, which was terrifying. It's so easy to get distracted and, during that time, I read books about entrepreneurship and emailed people to ask them to mentor me. But when I went back to class, I had to start catching up. My exam results were so bad, but the thought that I may not be able to stay at university hit me and I didn't want to lurk behind. I had always imagined myself at a university, and so I started putting in more hours.

### Why did you set up Gamer's Territory?

I come from a township, and during the holidays,



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I used to visit my cousins who live in the city. Obviously, the environment in the city is very different to the environment in the township.

I remember seeing my cousins play X-Box. I didn't know what an X-Box was. For me, it was so magical to see them control the players, and it was at that point that I knew I wanted to get into gaming. When I was in grade 10, I won a laptop in a school competition, sponsored by Nka'Thuto Edu Propeller (a non-profit STEM organisation) and became one of 30 top technopreneurs in South Africa. The first thing I did was install a game on that laptop. This set me apart from my peers in the township because no one had seen a laptop, let alone a computer game. Everyone came to my home to watch me play. That was when I thought I could make some money from this. I charged

people one rand (approximately 50p or 60 cents) to watch me play, and that's how Gamer's Territory was formed.

### What happened next?

I realised that interacting with digital devices like PlayStation is not just an entertainment, it stimulates the brain. So, I started doing some research on gaming, the technology divide and how to bridge that divide. That's when I wanted to do more. I became passionate about bringing tech to the townships, and I reinvested the money I made into Gamer's Territory – buying more devices, entering competitions, exploring virtual reality – and, just like that, the business grew into what it is today.

### How does playing computer games bridge the divide between people living in townships and people in more affluent circumstances?

When I was in school, I took coding classes and was able to start coding my own games. This was a revelation for me. Not enough people in the townships have access to such skills. My younger brother, who's 12 now, watched me build a computer from scratch, and the next thing I knew, he was building his own. That gave me so much hope, and I thought even if we just start teaching coding to five kids (because we have limited equipment), we would still be making a huge difference.

Introducing young people to virtual reality is also great because you can be from the most disadvantaged area and yet still visit places like Dubai, places you've never been or may never have had the chance to see. You can see Messi or Ronaldo in the FIFA football games.

Gamer's Territory uses the phrase 'unlocking dreams'. We want young people's dreams to be unlocked through gaming and virtual reality.

#### How old were you when you set up Tshepiso Malema Speaks?

I was 17. At the time, I was very shy, but I was in a space where I was surrounded by mentors and people who inspire me. Some of my peers in the township are just living for the sake of it, and I wanted to do something that would help them feel just as motivated as me.

I started a blog and wrote down my thoughts, motivational insights, how I managed to change my mindset and my life goals. A few months later, I'd had over 500 visitors from all over the country – all over the world, actually – and the feedback I was getting was so positive. I thought if I could reach people's hearts just through the blog, I could convert the blog into an organisation.

When I say organisation, I was still doing this by myself, talking to students, talking to my classmates, but there I was, acting as a motivational speaker for young people. At my school principal's request, I spoke in an assembly and, before I knew it, I was visiting other schools and talking to other students there.

Now, we're a team of 14 young people, all of whom have diverse skills. Tshepiso Malema Speaks aims to give students guidance and mentorship on their careers and instil a spirit of entrepreneurship in South Africa, which has such high levels of unemployment.

#### How did you find your voice when you were so shy?

I was forced to have a voice because of the work I do and the competitions I was entering. People started inviting me to become a speaker. When you start to see positive results, it gives you power to keep going. I could see the impact I was having, and so I was forced to get out of my comfort zone.



#### You once said, "The entrepreneur space taught me to take risks and I cannot take risks if I still want validation." What did you mean?

I said that a long time ago, inspired by my mentor, Emmanuel Bonoko. When my entrepreneurial journey started, I was fortunate enough to have this mentor who took me by the hand and guided me on a weekly basis. Once, Emmanuel was hosting an event attended by esteemed entrepreneurs in South Africa, and he asked me to pitch my ideas to them. I'd never pitched my ideas

to anyone, but his aim was to teach me the spirit of taking risks because opportunities come when you least expect them, when you're scared. If I didn't take this opportunity, it would be because I was seeking validation from other people.

I'm glad I didn't listen to people who told me to focus on school and forget about being an entrepreneur because I was too young. I didn't need validation, I had to take risks. ☺

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Instagram

gamerterritory\_sa  
One Kasi At A Time

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**THE MAIL & GUARDIAN'S TOP 200 YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS AWARD HAS OPENED SO MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ME. IT'S LIKE A TAP ON THE SHOULDER TO SAY, 'KEEP GOING WITH WHAT YOU'RE DOING'.**

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**What are you most proud of, and why?**

Being nominated for the Mail & Guardian's top 200 Young South Africans. It's an iconic list that every young person wants to be a part of, and I feel humble to be nominated alongside other young people who inspire me.

I was taught how to do 5- and 10-year plans, and the Mail & Guardian was in my 10-year plan. I thought I was going to be nominated when I was 25 or 26, but it happened much sooner. Even now, I don't know who nominated me, but I really hope they come clean one day so that I can thank them.

This award has opened so many opportunities for me and allows me to make an impact for even more people. It's like a tap on the shoulder to say, 'Keep going with what you're doing'.

**On your LinkedIn profile you say: "In a nutshell, Tshepiso Malema is what the world is waiting for". Where does your self-belief come from?**

That's a really, really a hard question! It's not really about me right now, it's about other people. Entrepreneurship is one of the hardest journeys someone can take. Most of the time, I doubt myself. I'm not always self-confident, and I'm always asking myself whether I should continue. But I wouldn't be able to get any work done if I didn't have the confidence to do it. I wouldn't be able to go to publishers, ask people to be my mentors, nor would others be able to learn and benefit from my journey. So, I always have a 'why'.

I'm writing a book called *What is Your Why?* I believe it's my 'why' that keeps me going. My initial 'why' was to change my family situation, but now it's more about helping people improve their lives so that they can improve their families'



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lives and then maybe even more people will be inspired by them.

It's not about self-confidence or how I feel. One of the biggest responsibilities we have as leaders, or as people who are destined to do more, is to do certain things no matter how we're feeling. We just have to fight.

#### Can everyone learn this ethos?

Yes, because I've witnessed it. To give an example, one of my team members at Tshepiso Malema Speaks used to be very shy. But when she saw the change I was making just by telling my story – because everyone has a unique story that might change someone's life – she started telling us, the team, her story, and it was so inspiring.

One day, I put her in the spotlight. I said, "Just talk to these kids, I'm sure they really want to hear your story." Today she's getting gigs just for telling her story.

I think if you can get away from the idea that you're

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doing this for yourself and stop thinking about the masses of people you're going to impact, this makes things a lot easier. When you start to think about the potential outcomes of what you're doing, it can be daunting, and you can lose confidence. You just need to do it without over-thinking!

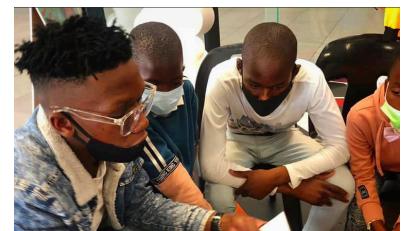
## About Tshepiso Malema

Tshepiso is in his second year studying information systems at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He is also the founder of Gamer's Territory, which provides young people in townships access to computer games, and Tshepiso Malema Speaks, which aims to help people overcome challenges and fulfil their dreams. Tshepiso has been named one of the Mail & Guardian 200 Young South Africans and has been awarded a FOYA Award for Most Promising Founder of the Year 2022.



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Left: Tshepiso at the Gordon's Institute of Business Science. © Wingman Communications

Top right: Tshepiso mentoring boys © Mpumelelo Buthelezi

Bottom right: Tshepiso with his team at Tshepiso Malema Speaks. © Fernando Nando