Introduction and Background

Who I am

I'm Andrew. I'm a 29 year old, father of two (7 and 3). I've got both a BSc and an MSc in Computer Science, and have worked in tech my entire career, as well as freelancing in my spare time. Whilst I have not worked for or with Roblox, I have worked with a couple of their competitors. My generation is also the first generation to grow up with Smartphones, and Online Gaming. I have seen peers ruin their life with Online Game Addiction, and whilst I've been a lifelong gamer myself (and do play games with my children too!) I am incredibly conscious of the risk some games pose to people.

A brief Understanding of Roblox

Roblox is an "Online Game Platform and Game Creation System" – in short, it's an application where users can create games, and play games that others have created. It was first launched in 2006, although became rapidly more popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's notable as a Digital **Third Space**. Whilst it has millions of 'Experiences', the most popular ones include Brookhaven RP (a simulated town), Adopt Me! (a virtual pet game) and Blox Fruits (an online Role Playing Game). Games are rated either All Ages, 9+, 13+, or 17+, based on a questionnaire that the developer themselves answers.

To emphasise, these are User-Created, User-Moderated, and User-Populated games. Even if you set up your child's account to only be able to access games rated 'All Ages', you are relying on other users to accurately describe the content of their game, something that they are incentivised, by the monetisation mechanics available to them, not to do. Your children are playing experiences designed by strangers, moderated by strangers, with strangers. Do you want your child stumbling upon a Roblox Strip Club?

Predatory Game Design

It is difficult to define Predatory Game Design, but to take a stab at it, Predatory Game Design is Game Design that, rather than aiming to create a valuable, compelling experience, instead aims to exploit users and create compulsive behaviour. To make a comparison, look at some of the techniques that some Reality TV uses; artificial cliffhangers, drama focused editing, and manufactured conflict, all serve to keep people watching, whereas higher quality media will focus on the inherent value.

Whilst Roblox itself is a game platform, and so criticisms of the way games on Roblox are designed will not universally apply, there are a few game design features that need to be understood. You will find these principles across nearly all popular Roblox games.

Compulsive Game Design

There is an assumption amongst people that don't play games that there is a linear relationship between how 'fun' a game is, and how much people want to play it, but this is not the case. Whilst there are certainly compelling experiences in video games, there are also a lot of video

games that instead of being designed around quality game mechanics, are designed around facilitating compulsive behaviour.

In the early 20th Century, Psychologist BF Skinner put together an experiment where a rat was placed in a box with a lever that would dispense food after being pulled a few times. The rat quickly learned to pull the lever whenever it was hungry. He later changed the experiment, using a pigeon instead of a rat, and dropping foot pellets at random. Skinner found that when the drop was random, the Pigeon would push the button far more frequently, even compulsively, even long after he had stopped handing out rewards; a term he coined as 'Variable Ratio'.

I don't want to re-write the words of better writers, but I can tell you that not only are game developers aware of this, but they are actively and purposefully exploiting it. If you want to dive into this further, Troy Dunniway wrote a brilliant article deep-diving into the use of Psychology in video games, here. I should note Troy isn't some Luddite anti-tech activist, but a Founder/CEO with decades of game design experience.

All games use some form of reward and punishment mechanisms as part of their design; something as simple as a triumphant chord upon beating a difficult boss fits into this, but what we as parents should be worried about is when developers create games that are compulsive by design. This has been talked about in the context of MMO Addiction for decades now (and actually, this is a fantastic, if old, article that has some worked examples from real games), but a certain subset of developers have began acutely exploiting. After all, why bother making a fun and fulfilling game, when it is so much cheaper and lucrative to make an addicting one?

There is another industry that exploits this – Slot Machines. I thoroughly recommend the book "Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas" by Natascha Dow Schull; you will see strong parallels between Slot Machines, and the way some of the popular Roblox experiences (and other games, such as Fortnite) are designed. This compulsive game design is ultimately meant to serve as a way to encourage users to spend real money in these games, through **Micro-Transactions**.

Exploitative Micro-Transactions

Roblox features an entire digital economy based around Robux, which trade at an exchange rate of 1200 Robux per British Pound. Users can then use this Robux to buy in game items. In the glossary for Micro-Transactions, I've linked the Roblux marketplace.

Many of the games actively encourage users to purchase from the marketplace – and why wouldn't they? As developers, this is how they drive revenue.

It is easy to find examples of children who rack up huge bills without realising it. In Adopt Me!, the second most popular Roblox experience, users can purchase pets, and items for their pets. A Canberra family found their six year old son had run up an $8000 bill on virtual items across 501 purchases, within three weeks. When you see what those micro-transactions look like, it is easy to understand how a six year old can do that.



Even putting aside the number of children that are effectively tricked into spending real world money on digital items, in all of these Roblox experiences, users are encouraged to do this.

Loot Boxes

I wanted to specifically talk about Loot-Boxes as a pernicious form of Micro-Transaction. Existing at the intersection of Gambling and Micro-Transaction, the NHS Mental Health Director Claire Murdoch stated...

> *"Frankly no company should be setting kids up for addiction by teaching them to gamble on the content of these loot boxes. No firm should sell to children loot box games with this element of chance, so yes those sales should end. Young people's health is at stake, and although the NHS is stepping up with these new, innovative services available to families through our Long Term Plan, we cannot do this alone, so other parts of society must do what they can to limit risks and safeguard children's wellbeing."*

Roblox itself has started limiting which accounts can purchase Loot Boxes, based on parental settings and the age rating of the game, but as mentioned before, this is reliant on the developers to accurately describe their game, something they are financially incentivised not to do.

If your child is on Roblox, they are likely being introduced to gambling, likely before they even have the words to describe what it is they are experiencing. They may not be directly participating, but the people they interact with, be they peers or strangers, absolutely will be.

Metaverse Identity

One of the buzzwords of recent years, what a 'Metaverse' is can be a difficult thing to pin down. Facebook infamously changes its name to 'Meta' a few years ago to reflect a pursuit of Virtual Reality. There is the Cryptocurrency linked "Metaverse", where people spent eye watering sums on virtual property and items. Personally, I consider all virtual spaces where people invest some of their identity into, as part of the Metaverse. This is quite a loose definition, including someone curating their Instagram aesthetic, mid 2000s style chatrooms and forums, online games, and Roblox.

I've met a few people who have invested deeply into MMOs. I've played a few myself! I could explain how they can become a real life substitute, but a conversation I had with a friend who had let a lot of real-life balls be dropped because of their addiction to their MMO has stuck with me.

"In the real world, I am a university dropout who works in a call centre, who has never had a partner and has few friends. Online, I am a high ranking member of my guild, lead and organise complex missions, and am liked and respected."

My worry about Roblox, and the focus on in game cosmetics and experiences, is that for our children, it risks becoming a substitute for the real world. We've all heard horror stories of children being bullied for having the wrong type of phone, but imagine children getting bullied because they have the wrong virtual clothing on Roblox!

We're involved in Smartphone Free Childhood because of our worries surrounding technology use. We all instinctively know the risk of social media becoming a substitute for the real world. Whilst I have a lot to say about TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram, from my perspective, Roblox is one of the biggest technology risks to our children, yet one of the ones most parents know the least about.

My Child plays on Roblox. What can I do to make it safer?

I'm sure some people will be reading this having already given their child Roblox. For various reasons, such as Roblox being a vital digital third space to your child, or believing in risk mitigation over abstention, you might want to ask how you can make Roblox safer for your child.

Real Money is the Red Line

A lot of the predatory design, and potential damage, from Roblox can be avoided by simply not crossing the line of paying for Robux. If a user cannot purchase in game items, they are far less likely to be drawn into Roblox as a substitution for the real world, and they are far less likely to fall victim to compulsive design.

Know What they are playing, and Who With

This might go without saying, but you need to monitor what games your child is playing. Even with parental settings set as strict as they go, it will be possible for your child to access experiences that you wouldn't approve of.

Furthermore, it is a multiplayer game. You can set the controls to only allow people you are Friends with to communicate with you, but this requires you knowing everyone on their friends list. You can safely assume that there will be strangers trying to add your child to their friends list.

You can go even further and create a Private Server. I would also recommend speaking with the parents of your child's peers about how they interact with each other on Roblox.

Parental Controls and User Guides

I'd personally trust the material that Roblox puts out about how 'safe' it is about as far as I could throw David Baszucki, co-founder and CEO. As a company, your child is their cash cow, and they rely on you letting your child live in their platform. That said, familiarise yourself with the materials they publish on wellbeing.

Glossary

Third Space

A place that is not the home, or workplace/school, where people socialise. Traditionally for children, these would include Playgrounds, Youth Groups, but nowadays increasingly include ‘Digital’ Third Spaces. These include Social Media and Online Games, such as what you find on Roblox.

Microtransaction

A microtransaction is transaction for a small in game item. These can include cosmetics, games modes, game maps, or characters. In Roblox, these are paid for with Robux, with £1 being roughly 1200 Robux. You can browse the Roblux Marketplace for examples of what Roblox users can buy on the platform.

Loot-Boxes

A “Loot-Box” is a purchasable ‘box’, where users don’t know what the contents are prior to them winning. It is effectively a form of gambling, normally combined with other compulsive design practices.

Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO)

An MMO is an online game with hundreds, thousands, or in some cases, millions, of players. Famous examples include World of Warcraft, Runescape, Everquest, and The Elder Scrolls Online.