Olivier Glassey, STS Lab, University of Lausanne

Building large-scale infrastructure to harness imagination: How Roblox's platform design shapes, enrols, captures and exploits teenager's creativity

Abstract

With over than 48 million of daily active users, the Roblox gaming platform has become a major playground for children. In 2020 the company announced that two thirds of all U.S. kids between 9 and 12 years old use Roblox which is played by a third of all Americans under the age of 16 (Kharif, 2020). One of the platform's key characteristics consists of its specific content which is formed by a collection of over 20 million « experiences » (games). These games are exclusively generated using dedicated development tools made freely available to all community members. In our contribution we would like to focus on this toolbox which we analyse as an infrastructure which facilitates creativity while formatting outputs to ensure maximal value extraction by the platform.

On this platform, each user is invited to create his or her own content with the promise of significant revenue if successful. A tiny fraction of these huge collection become actually profitable for a very few of the 9.5 million so-called developers who have created content using these tools. While tapping in the massive resource provided by the imagination, the time and the work of countless teenagers these productions are simultaneously technically bound to Roblox platform and its economic circuits (internal advertisement, microtransactions, fees, etc.).

We will examine how the creation process incorporates technical constraints, frames the type of possible outputs and fosters a controlled small world of innofusion (Fleck, 1988). More specifically we will explore how this boundary infrastructure (Bowker & Star, 1999) prepares and organises different types of entrenchments (computer skills, game design, expected behaviour of the potential players, etc.) in Roblox's proprietary, fully managed cloud software.

Finally, we will outline how this specific case could provide fruitful insights to the evolution from the so-called wikinomics platforms (Tapscott 2006) to the infrastructure of emerging metaverse initiatives a domain in which Roblox profiles itself as a key player.

References

- Bowker C. G. and Leigh Star S. (1999) Sorting things out, classification and its consequences, MIT press.
- Fleck, J. (1988). Innofusion or diffusation? The nature of technological developments in robotics. Edinburgh PICT Working Paper.
- Kharif O. 2020 Kids Flock to Roblox for Parties and Playdates During Lockdown, Bloomberg.
- Tapscott D. and Williams A.D. (2006) Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything Portfolio.

Bio

-