

Alissia Metcalfe

Eng110C #30906

Unit 2 Polished Draft

26 June 2026

### The Modern Playground for Predators

Driven by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, online gaming such as *Roblox* surged in popularity among children, eventually earning the name the children's metaverse. While the term is widely used, it raises a fundamental question: what exactly is a metaverse? "Academics have described it as a three-dimensional or spatial internet, an immersive virtual society with its own functioning economy, and a shared world where avatars participate in political, economic, social and cultural life" (Elena et al., 2026 pg.3). Users are able to create avatars and communicate with one another in the metaverse via in-game chat, voice chat and private messaging. While this is a popular feature, it has received a large amount of backlash as predators have been using the feature to target and exploit underage users. The average age of players ranges from sixteen to seventeen years old with a minimum age requirement to play *Roblox* being five years old.

*Roblox* has a net worth or market capitalization of \$35.3 billion. The co-founder and Chief Executive Officer David Baszucki "addressed" the issues on CBS news stating the company is aware of the issue of predators targeting child users. They have rolled out an AI-facial screening that estimates a users age prior to them being able to use the chat feature (CBS Mornings, 2025). However, with the new roll out of AI- facial screenings users are still reporting cases of predators exploiting child users. In Spokane a 9 year old child was targeted through *Roblox*, the predator gained the child's trust by posing as his church's pastor. The predator

learned about the 9 year old boy's past and threatened to shoot him knowing one of his family members shot themselves (4 News Now, 2021). The rise in predator cases and inappropriate content on *Roblox* has led to the following states taking legal action, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Indiana, Texas, Tennessee and Nebraska. The *State of Nebraska v. Roblox Corporation, 2026* states “Despite being aware of child exploitation and pornography on its platform for years, Defendant failed to take reasonable precautions, and it even expanded efforts to attract more adults onto its platform for profit.” The responses from earlier lawsuits against the corporation in 2026 lead to settlement payouts ranging from eleven million to twelve million dollars. Which poses the question if the company is actively trying to enhance child safety across its gaming platform or more focused on the revenue it is making with the wider age pool of users.

*Roblox* has gained the attention of adult users despite its nickname given the children's metaverse. Ages ranging from eighteen and up have also gravitated towards this metaverse. As it has brought some awareness to the users online, there has been an issue with adult users being able to play and communicate with child users. “Within the metaverse, users engage through avatars and interact with one another in a simulated environment that is both immersive and persistent” (Elena et al., 2026 pg.4). Communication built within the metaverse allows users to chat within the game using in-game text, voice chat and direct messaging with “friends”. This chat feature has given the opportunity for predators to communicate directly with minors. “As a result, children may be exposed to various risks, including data privacy, inappropriate content, grooming, and cyberbullying” (Elena et al., 2026 pg.7). If a child is able to immerse themselves into a virtual world that is so dangerous, parental guidance, supervision, and controls are essential.

The lack of parental supervision for minors playing this game along with the lackluster age restrictions set by *Roblox* has given predators the opportunity to target innocent adolescent users. “Unlike traditional social platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, the metaverse offers offenders enhanced opportunities to manipulate coerce, or groom others in highly immersive, anonymous settings. The embodied nature of VR interactions (including voice, gesture, eye contact, and even touch via haptics) can intensify the sense of presence and emotional realism” (Elena et al., 2026 pg.3). As virtual gaming worlds continue to evolve, it is equally important to examine the risks they may impose to young users.

How can parents become proactive instead of reactive? Think of it in the sense of a playground, we take your children to the playground and as a parent stand and supervise them playing. You have the knowledge that there are possible predators and are being proactive to prevent your child from getting hurt. You don't drop your kids off at the playground and leave. Then why are parents dropping their children off at these online playgrounds and leaving them? The lack of parental supervision and controls on online games are also to blame when it comes to child exploitation. Online games are arguably more dangerous than your public playground. The amount of strangers that are accessible to your child has increased to thousands and predators are preying all over. It is a guardians responsibility to protect the children as much as possible from these predators, and take the time to research the online game the child wishes to play. Set parental controls that prevent inappropriate content from being accessible to them and keep the communication channels open between you and your child.

The FBI advice states that “Parents should talk to their children about the dangers of being sexually exploited online, and they should monitor their children's internet use along with online video gaming, an area where pedophiles are increasingly operating” (Federal Bureau of

Investigation, 2011). The FBI states predators are targeting places where children play, before the internet, it was physical places like the playground or zoo. Offenders are going to online gaming and using tactics like hiding their identity behind avatars and pretending to be underage to communicate with minors online, persuasive tactics to earn their trust and inflict self harm to children or sexually exploit them. They are able to log on and interact with adolescents with little to no regulations, allowing a free playing field for predators to exploit children. “When they were found guilty, they were on average 39 years old, with an age range of 21 to 58 years” (Linda 2012, p. 33). Many online offenders exploit the anonymity provided by avatars to deceive children and collect sensitive information.

As online gaming continues to grow in popularity among children, cybersecurity professionals play a vital role in protecting them from online threats, safeguarding their personal information, and promoting safer digital gaming environments. Raising national public awareness through the Department of Homeland Security with the Known2Protect project to help prevent and combat child sexual exploitation and abuse. Online predators will always seek new ways to target children in virtual spaces, making online safety an ongoing responsibility. While technology continues to evolve, parents, educators, and communities must remain vigilant by teaching children safe online practices and monitoring their digital activities. By working together, we can help ensure that children enjoy the benefits of the internet while staying protected from those who wish to harm.

## References

- CBS Mornings. (2025, November 18). *Roblox CEO responds to safety allegations and discusses new measures to protect kids*. youtube.com.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73qmNZc2ziw&t=95s>
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011, May 17). *Child Predators — FBI*. FBI.  
<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/child-predators>
- Martellozzo, E. (2026). *Virtual Reality Risks for Children in the Metaverse: An Examination through Criminological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Quayle, E., & Ribisl, K. M. (2012). *Understanding and preventing online sexual exploitation of children*. Routledge.
- 4 News Now. (2021, November 4). *This is how a predator targets a 9-year-old Spokane boy on Roblox*. youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=levReirzSYM>
- STATE OF NEBRASKA v. ROBLOX CORPORATION. (2026, March 4). *IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF ADAMS COUNTY, NEBRASKA STATE OF NEBRASKA, ex rel. MICHAEL T. HILGERS, ATTORNEY GENERAL, Plaintiffs, v. Nebraska Attorney General*. Retrieved June 17, 2026, from <https://ago.nebraska.gov/sites/default/files/doc/Nebraska%20Roblox%20Complaint.pdf>

