

The trouble with Roblox, the video game empire built on child labour | The Guardian

By Simon Parkin

January 26, 2022

Anna* was 10 when she built her first video game on Roblox, a digital platform where young people can make, share and play games together. She used Roblox much like a child from a previous generation might have used cardboard boxes, marker pens and stuffed toys to build a castle or a spaceship and fill it with characters and story. There was one alluring difference: Roblox hosted Anna's tiny world online, enabling children she had never met and who maybe lived thousands of miles away from her home in Utah to visit and play. Using Roblox's in-built tools – child-friendly versions of professional software – Anna began to learn the rudiments of music composition, computer programming and 3D modelling. Game-making became an obsession. When she wasn't at school Anna was rarely off her computer.

As she became more proficient, Anna's work caught the attention of some experienced users on Roblox, game-makers in their 20s who messaged her with a proposition to collaborate on a more ambitious project. Flattered by their interest, Anna became the fifth member of the nascent team, contributing art, design and programming to the game. She did not sign up to make money, but during a Skype call the game-makers offered the teenager 10% of any profits the game made in the future. It turned out to be a generous offer. Within a few months, the game had become one of the most played on Roblox. For Anna, success had an unfathomable, life-changing impact. At 16 her monthly income somehow exceeded her parents' combined salaries. She calculated that she was on course to earn \$300,000 in a year, a salary equivalent to that of a highly experienced Google programmer. Anna cancelled her plans to go to college.

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