

How Russian teenagers are engaged in the Metaverse games

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Abstract

Metaverse refers to technologies that provide people with experiences to become part of connected digital worlds. The young generation, main users of Metaverse, explore virtual worlds, create and socialize with other players, not necessarily chasing a game goal. Thus, it is important to study on the young generation's opinions to clarify in what directions the Metaverse game industry will follow. In this end, this study made a survey on what makes Roblox a pre-metaverse game not from scholars' perspectives but those of kids. Focusing on Russian teenagers, this study made an online survey with 12 middle school students about their seeing of metaverse games. The survey had 12 questions dedicated to different metaverse aspects in Roblox including multiply, digital currency and their perspectives of future game development. The results illustrated that teenagers have a clear understanding of the term metaverse and they specifically emphasize that in the metaverse they are attracted by freedom of action and self-expression. The surveyed teenagers preferred role-playing and simulation, followed by construction. It is worth noting that all respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the economic policy within the game. Thus, teenagers have their own ideas about Roblox and those properties of the metaverse that are presented in the game. This study makes it possible to look at the metaverse games with its characteristics from a user's angle.

Keyword : Metaverse, Russia, Roblox, teenagers

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the term metaverse has re-emerged in a very big way. Announcing Meta Platform, joining Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Oculus in October 2021 [1], combining social networks, chats, and its broad goals in this space makes a pre-metaverse space. But it is a term that can be applied to broad games including Fortnite, Roblox, Minecraft, VR, and AR even Animal Crossing. In addition to this, a recent report by global consulting firm McKinsey reported that the metaverse industry could potentially be worth \$5 trillion by 2030 [2]. From users communicating and interacting with one another from shopping to trying on clothes, the possibilities are truly endless as

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shwon in the example of Gucci and Vans have created entirely customized and branded worlds on Roblox [3]. In April 2021, Roblox (made in 2006) hit 202 million monthly active users and a lot of them are children. Even though the company recently reported that its users are ‘aging up’, there are still over 20 million of daily active users that are 13 years and under [4]. What form Metaverse landscape will take is a subject of debate. Meta (Facebook) invested heavily in an immersive experience and others see the metaverse as more like an integration of the physical environment with the digital as shown in the highly successful Pokemon Go phone game [5].

Furthermore, more questions still remain regarding teenagers and metaverse games, little to no work has been done to empirically explore how teenagers experience and feel about metaverse games including Roblox. In particular, Roblox is gaining more popularity among Russian teenagers in a variety of ways including free-to-play, freedom of action, and the ability to communicate with other people and friends. In this regards, this study was conducted to examine what the kids who are the main targeting users of Roblox, think about the Roblox. While scholars and businessmen have focused on the outer dimensions of the Metaverse and its economic prospects, teenagers who already play games with some of the characteristics of the Metaverse have been making up their minds about what and how these games can be used in their actual lives. To this end, this study conducted the survey with 12 Russian middle school students to see how they experience in Roblox in their everyday life.

2. Related studies

2.1 How to define Metaverse

The term ‘Metaverse’ originated in the 1992 science fiction novel Snow Crash, as a mix of two Greek words of ‘meta’ and ‘universe’ [6], where Metaverse development is linked to advancing virtual reality technology due to increasing demands for immersion. Social interaction and 3D virtual worlds are often an integral feature in many massively multiplayer online games. Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, now Meta, says, “the metaverse is the 3D internet.” [7]. Matthew Ball, Venture capitalist, author of a compelling essay on the metaverse, defines 7 main characteristics of the Metaverse as shown in [Table 1].

[Table 1] 7 main characteristics of Metaverse

Characteristics	Description
Constancy	Metaverses have no pauses or reboots. This is an immanent and endless world.

Synchronicity	Metaverses exist simultaneously for all and in real time.
Unlimited	The number of users tends to infinity.
The functioning of the economy	The internal economy of the game is working at full capacity. You can not only spend money, but also earn money.
Augmentation	Virtual and real life are linked together. The Metaverse is not so much a separate world from the present as its complement.
Compatibility	Meta provides users with unprecedented data compatibility.
Openness	Metaverses are available to any authors and content makers who can create their own experiences in them.

2.2 What is Roblox and who are its main users?

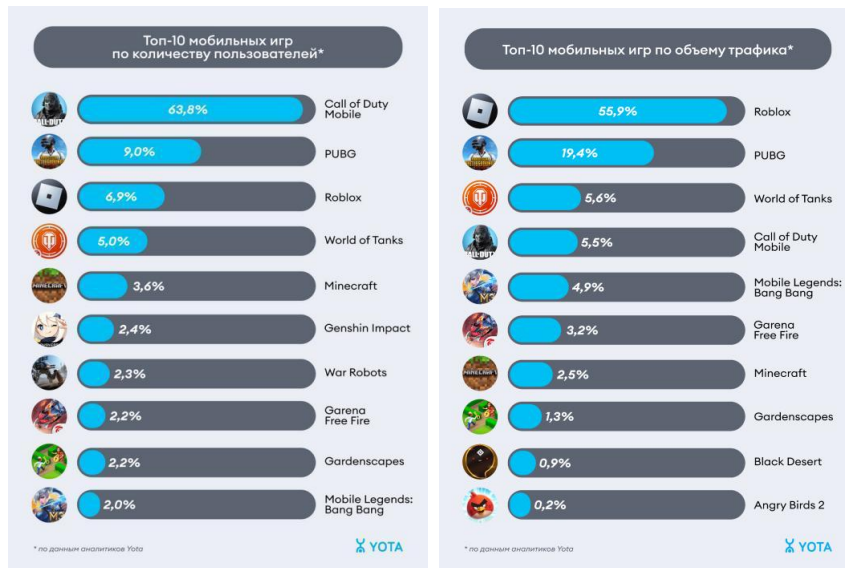
Roblox is different from the games including Minecraft and Fortnite because at first it was created as a game platform. Roblox is accessible on a range of different devices. In 2021 it hit 43 million active daily users more than half of them are 13 years and under [4]. Games on Roblox are officially called ‘experiences’ which have a variety of genres. Users can play in games tagged as roleplay, adventure, fighting, obby (obstacle courses), tycoon, simulator, and more. The platform itself is free but users can make purchases within each experience. The app allows users to send friend requests, exchange messages, and trade with other users within the games. In addition, the games can be upvoted, downvoted, followed, or favorited, which helps signal their quality and popularity to other users. In 2021, Roblox presented Spatial Voice Chat and it added animated faces to capture the realistic human expressions. Roblox occasionally hosts real-life and virtual events including BloxCon and its first virtual concert in 2020. On September 17, 2021, a virtual concert by the American band Twenty One Pilots took place [8].

2.3 Roblox hype in Russia

The popularity of meta games is growing everywhere including in Russia as 2 million users enter Roblox on a daily basis, second only to USA, Brazil and the Philippines as shown in [Fig. 1] [9].

In addition, courses with online and offline attendance on the development of games in Roblox including programming of 3D worlds, coding, for children from 8 to 15 years old [10], have become popular. Addition to this Roblox is much more affordable compared to other metaverses, it does not require special hardware or software. Thus, there is a division in society, on the one hand, the growing popularity of games such as Roblox and Fortnite, on the other hand, a biased attitude among officials

and the older generation.



[Fig. 1] Roblox is in the top three in terms of the number of users and first in terms of traffic among users of the Russian operator Yota as of June 2022

3. Survey Results

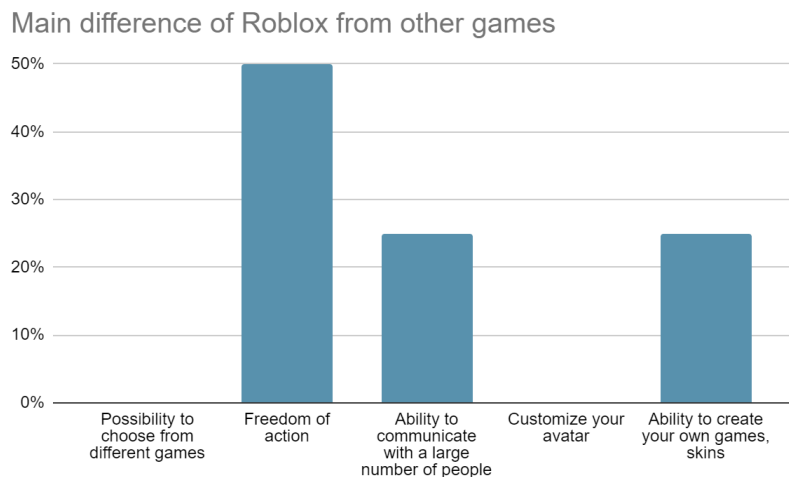
Today's children and teenagers are surrounded by technologies and they get their first mobile devices before the age of 12, and sometimes even earlier [11], they become part of everyday life. This study conducted a survey to see which aspects of the Roblox as a Metaverse game are attractive to teenagers aged 11 to 12. The survey involved the 5th grade of a Moscow secondary school and a total of 12 students, of whom absolutely all encountered the concept of the metaverse not only in the context of films, but also games. They get used to the term Metaverse and faced it in their everyday life as illustrated in [Table 2].

[Table 2] Survey information

Subject	Teenager aged 11 to 12 years, Russian state school num. 1505
Sample size	12 people
Survey method	Online survey
Survey period	November 14, 2022

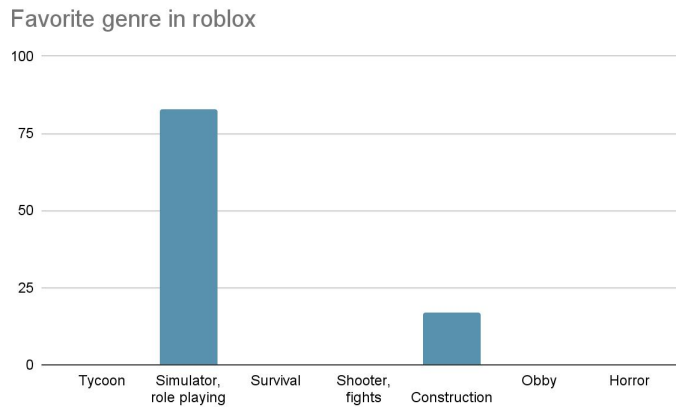
3.1 Roblox as a communication tool

The main difference between Roblox and other ordinary video games is that the students noted of the freedom of action, the ability to communicate with a large number of people and create their own games and merchandise. The difference is also what attracts Russian teenagers to this game the most as shown in [Fig. 2]. They answered that they use Roblox as a communication tool, socialize with friends, and make new ones. which means Roblox is a social networks to the teenagers.

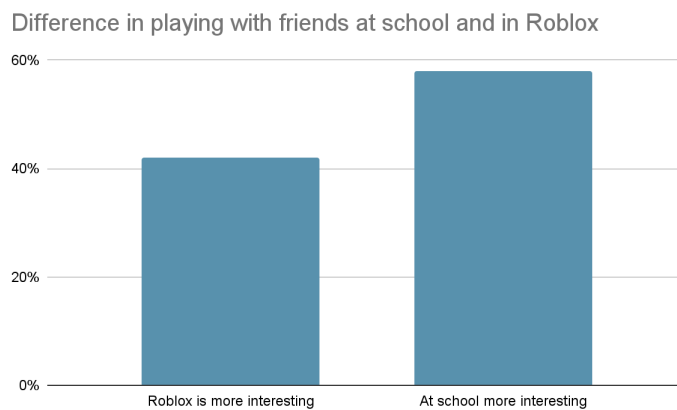


[Fig. 2] Main difference of Roblox from other games

In addition to communication and freedom of action, they chose simulations, role-playing games (83%) and construction (17%) as their favorite genres in Roblox as shown in [Fig. 3]. Teenagers chose from many different genres that can give them the opportunity to communicate with other people and create and express themselves. Despite the fact that the students acknowledged the problem of online bullying in Roblox, 58% have encountered it personally and 42% have heard about this problem, the majority (58%) noted that it is easier to find a friend in the game in Roblox. However, 58% also answered that playing at school or outside with friends is more fun as shown in [Fig. 4]. That small gap between its more fun to spend time in game and offline shows that the students do not divide communication in Roblox and offline. At the same time, the attitude of parents towards Roblox in most cases (more than 80%) is described as an opportunity to play with friends when there is no opportunity to meet or as a fun pastime when there is free time (17%).



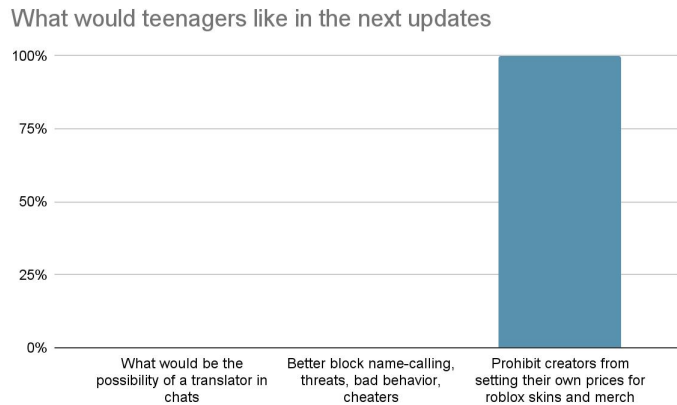
[Fig. 3] Main difference of Roblox from other games



[Fig. 4] Difference in playing with friends at school and in Roblox

3.2 Economic ecosystem in Roblox

Another important note is that the teenagers understood the economy of Roblox even though none of the students surveyed made purchases for the game currency. The survey did not include the teenagers under 18 to be an economically active part of the society and the teenagers do not have the right to get a job and the purchases they make are at the expense of their parents. However, they themselves can be both consumers and sellers so that they can create their own games and earn money. The teenagers have their own idea of the rules of the game in the gaming economy and in regards to the subsequent question about what they want to see in the next updates, everyone pointed to the introduction of a ban on creators to set their own price for skins and merchandise as shown in [Fig. 5].



[Fig. 5] What would teenagers like in the next Roblox update

It should be noted here that in Roblox there is no price regulations including minimum and maximum price so that the creators can specify any amount for their creation. When you walk into a Roblox store, you can indeed run into a hat (in the Limited section) for 20 million roblox (approximately \$300,000), even though this is a limited product. This online pricing policy does not suit teenagers.

3.3 Roblox as part of everyday life

It is also useful to note that the survey included a question about activities dedicated to Roblox, outside the game, for example, participation in communities in social networks and the classes in programming in the Lua language, which is used to write games for Roblox. At the same time, the answer options included both "Yes, I am a member of groups and communities in social networks", and "Yes, I am a member of groups in social networks, plus I attend additional classes." All respondents answered that in addition to social networks, they attend classes on programming, creating games and avatars in Roblox. That means that the students are not just players but also active participants who understand the language of the game with their abilities at the software level. They learn to create not only the worlds inside the games, but also the games themselves. At the same time, to the final question about how they would like to see the games of the future, 50% would like to improve the graphics, increase the possibilities inside the game including avatar's facial expressions and improved movements, but without complete immersion in the metaverse, 33% would like to be able to combine full immersive and play through the screen while only 1 student expressed a desire to see the games of the future as shown in the movie Ready Player One.

4. Conclusion

This study showed that the Russian teenagers surveyed have a general idea of the new term of Metaverse. They like to spend time in Roblox because of freedom of action, the ability to create their own digital objects and their own world, as well as the ability to communicate with each other. This result is in the similar line with other research about social VR with the Sweden teenagers, where teenagers highlighted creativity, explorations, and the freedom to generate their own content and artifacts to be the main attractions in online digital space [12]. In addition, they actively participate not only online, but also in offline activities including additional classes, programming lessons, and communities in social networks. However, when they were against the current in-game currency and price regulation. This leads to the conclusion that the teenagers understand the in-game economy and would probably actively participate in it, but they are not satisfied with today's policies. Interestingly, although more than half of the respondents experienced bullying in the game, they also noted that it is much easier to find a friend in the game online. Since most adults support the use of Roblox as an alternative to live communication, during quarantine, bad weather and other factors that interfere with live communication, Roblox can be considered as a kind of virtual playground where teenagers can spend time. While the students enjoy playing Roblox and especially noted the opportunity to play with new people and make new friends, more than half prefer live communication.

To sum up, the main users of Metaverse do not feel any requirement to replace the real world or fully integrate it into the online world. Roblox has flexibility that allows teenagers to change their usual activities and express themselves through the game, meet new or meet old friends, but this is not a substitute for real live communication. To Russian teenagers, Metaverse is more like an addition to everyday life.

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