

## **Speculators Inside the Slop Factory: Shovelware and Financialized Game Development in Roblox**

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Roblox, launched in 2006 by Roblox Corporation, hosts more than 40 million player-created games and had 85.3 million daily users as of Q3 2024. The platform promotes game creation as an educational tool. Based on interviews with 17 Roblox creators, this article explores how players are drawn into game development. Unlike traditional platform labor, Roblox incentivizes creators through speculative financial gain rather than creative passion. These creators face both the precarity typical of game development and a winner-takes-all dynamic, intensifying cost-benefit calculations around asset use. This environment encourages speculative reuse of assets and manipulation of Robux, contributing to the rise of shovelware: games perceived as unoriginal and derivative because of their excessive use of premade assets. Ultimately, developers respond to transactional and precarious working practices, forged under restrictive platform governance, with churn—producing content rapidly and routinely in large quantities—as a financialized strategy with critical implications for cultural production.

*Keywords: digital labor, financialization, game engines, game industry, game production, game workers*

Since its release in 2006, Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) has become a platform known for developing and distributing player-created games called “Experiences,” which are monetized using a virtual currency called Robux. Roblox hosts more than 40 million player-created Experiences that attract 85.3 million daily active users (as of the fourth quarter of 2024; Roblox Corporation, 2025). Robux serves as in-game currency for purchasing items within Experiences and also as platform currency for buying access to those

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Experiences. The scale of this monetization marks a shift in gaming platforms: from user-generated content within massively multiplayer online games to Roblox's player-created Experiences, which accrued profits for creators that exceeded \$740 million in 2023 (D'Anastasio, 2024). Creators can cash out these profits through the platform's Developer Exchange (DevEx) program, which, at the time of writing, converts Robux into USD at an exchange rate of \$0.00385 per Robux, with Roblox Corporation retaining approximately one-third of the value. In 2024, Roblox developers used DevEx to cash out \$923 million, meaning Roblox Corporation indirectly extracted \$1.8 billion from its player economy (Roblox Corporation, 2024).<sup>2</sup>

This integrated control over monetization through Robux and DevEx is a cornerstone of Roblox's (Roblox Corporation, 2006) closed platform ecosystem, which includes centralized control over how players develop and distribute games. For example, Roblox Studio (Roblox Corporations, 2012) is a platform-native development environment, providing self-contained editors that streamline and simplify the game development process for creators. Like other production platforms, Roblox Studio tethers workers to proprietary toolsets and workflows (see Nicoll & Keogh, 2019; Whitson, 2019; Young, 2021). Unlike games made with commercial game engines such as Unreal or Unity, which are playable across multiple platforms and devices and predominantly create lock-in mechanics<sup>3</sup> through restrictions on workflows and supported devices (Foxman, 2019), Roblox locks creators and their creations into its platform's integrated distribution channels. Roblox's self-contained and accessible creation tools align with commercial game engines' claims to democratize game development (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019) while operating as "walled domains" (Lehdonvirta, 2022, p. 205) that centralize control through restrictive forms of interoperability. Roblox thus marks a pivotal moment in the expansion of capital, emergent labor formations, and practices of platform value extraction. As such, our study asks:

*RQ1: How do Roblox's platform mechanisms and governance shape user-created game development practices?*

Our analysis suggests that Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) content creators experience the inherent instability of game development, which is compounded by the platform's highly competitive, winner-takes-all system—a common trait in platform-driven cultural production. We argue this combination within Roblox amplifies financial forms of decision making concerning whether to purchase or create game assets, a fundamental consideration in game development (Barr, 2023). Consequently, creators are pushed toward speculative practices, such as reusing existing assets and manipulating Robux for financial gain,

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<sup>2</sup> Regional distribution: 21% United States and Canada, 26% Europe, 25% Asia Pacific, and 28% rest of the world (Roblox Corporation, 2025); DevEx current conversion rate to \$0.00385 per Robux, whereas the conversion rate of Robux when subscribing to the cheapest tier at 500 Robux for \$4.99 a month is 0.01. In other words, Roblox Corporation deducts 61.5% of the consumer-facing spending that goes into the economy. Additionally, Roblox Corporation takes a standard 30% conversion fee and 30% cut of all in-game purchases.

<sup>3</sup> "Lock-in' is a negotiation between companies, products, and consumers in which the norms and uses surrounding a product are set and adopted" (Foxman, 2019, p. 2). For example, Unity's Vive Input Utility is an asset available at Unity's Asset Store with built-in code that assists developers with supported headset and controller input (Foxman, 2019).

which contributes to the widespread production of “shovelware”—games deemed unoriginal because of their reliance on premade assets. Connecting these financialized development methods to the rise of shovelware demonstrates how creators translate platform-related uncertainties, such as unpredictable algorithmic visibility and fluctuating virtual currency, into speculative financial ventures (Haiven, 2014). Functioning within a context of platform-generated ambiguity, where outcomes are uncertain rather than simply involving calculable risk (Halpern & Mitchell, 2023), these developers adopt financialized approaches and mindsets, shifting understandings and implications of cultural production.

This article contributes to research on game making beyond the studio by shifting the focus away from negotiating creativity and craft within industrial constraints (Whitson et al., 2021) and from sustaining industrial production through alternative and marginalized sites of video game production (Keogh, 2023). Instead, the case of Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) highlights the churn—producing content in large numbers, rapidly, and routinely—of a playbour production system fueled by formulaic workflows (Foxman, 2019, 2022) and challenges of discoverability (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019) that come with the platformization of game making. Our study emphasizes how the varied landscape of everyday game making consists of both grassroots incubators (Young, 2018) and platformized slop factories. Shovelware distributed on digital storefronts such as Steam and by publishers such as PlayStation and Nintendo has been criticized as a growing blight in the industry (Blake, 2025; Valentine, 2025; Zwiezen, 2024). Our work traces this rise of derivative forms of creativity (Haiven, 2023) in video games, beyond platformed distribution to platformized production—going behind the algorithmic shopfront to show how the gears of the slop factory are oiled by virtual currencies and everyday speculative practices.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Identities Adrift: The Democratization Dispositif***

This article investigates how platformized cultural production in Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) shifts player creators from laboring subjects to financial agents. Roblox developers represent a specific band within a spectrum of platform labor that makes up the so-called gig economy. Rather than performing on-demand tasks coordinated through algorithmic management or participating in studio-based employment or contracts using in-house or commercial game engines, Roblox developers engage in project-based cultural production that is piecemeal and oriented toward short-term value creation. In this respect, Roblox developers are cloud-based freelancers with “a high level of technical skill in such fields as graphic design, computer programming, and journalism . . . typically engaged on a project-specific basis” (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 275). Cultural production—even when platformized—is more difficult to algorithmically manage than on-demand labor such as ride-hailing or microtasking (Heeks, 2017). In this sense, Roblox’s project-based work has more in common with platforms such as Etsy, Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer, as it consists of piecemeal contractual gigs rather than stable, vocation-oriented creative enterprises.

Nicoll and Keogh (2019) examine the contradictions of Unity’s claim to “democratization” of game development and the implications for developers’ professional identities. They observe anxieties in developers’ reflections over “asset flipping” (the reuse of premade assets for low-cost development projects) and “indiepocalypse” (the proliferation of cheaply made games that intensifies competition), two phenomena

of cultural poaching that emerge as game development becomes more accessible through lowered skill barriers and availability of ready-made assets. Discourses around indieocalypse and asset flipping negotiate boundaries of professional legitimacy and aspiration in a market perceived as saturated with games and developers. These anxieties illustrate a persistent tension in cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2018) between games as consumer products and as cultural objects. Nicoll and Keogh (2019) extend McRobbie's (2016) concept of the creativity dispositif, which interpellates middle-class subjects to pursue creative vocations through self-entrepreneurial pathways, by framing developers as guinea pigs in experiments with new configurations of creative labor. Within this configuration, developer countercultures that were once critical of AAA or high-budget industry and labor standards are increasingly rearticulated and mobilized as expansionist and entrepreneurial policy discourse.

Similarly, the Roblox Corporation frames Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) as a "platform" rather than a game in public statements (Diaz, 2021) and job ads (Roblox Corporation, 2022), but deemphasizes player creation of Roblox games as platform work. Instead, the company refers to development activities on its platform as education—a term tailored to younger players, who are a majority (56% are under 16 years old) of the player base (Roblox Corporation, 2025).<sup>4</sup> According to *The Guardian* journalist Simon Parkin (2022), several high-profile Roblox game developers reported losing their teenage years to burnout from overwork on the platform. Meanwhile, Roblox Studio head Stefano Corazza deflected such criticisms in an interview with the trade publication *Eurogamer*:

Like, you can say, "Okay, we are exploiting, you know, child labor," right? Or, you can say: we are offering people anywhere in the world the capability to get a job, and even like an income. So, I can be like 15 years old, in Indonesia, living in a slum, and then now, with just a laptop, I can create something, make money and then sustain my life. (Tapsell, 2024, para. 14)

By appealing to the logic of sustaining livelihoods through creating Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) games, Corazza conflates the platform's educational promises with economic opportunity. The digital games industry has a long history of enlisting players into worklike activities that have been expropriated for corporate profit. Early examples of game mods became global hits, vastly outperforming the commercial games they were based on.<sup>5</sup> These modding practices emerged from gift economies, where tinkering and sharing were part of emergent cultures of play, that became appropriated by game companies into platformized marketplaces for the commodification of player-created mods (Joseph, 2018). There are many precedents and configurations for how game companies appropriate different forms of work that players do as fans, consumers, and hobbyists (see Chia, 2020; Fast et al., 2016, for overviews). However, journalists such as Parkin (2022) argue that Roblox is not just turning players into workers; it is transforming teens into financial agents within the global money circuit that connects transnational flows of capital, value, and financial practices to broader economic systems. This echoes Nicoll and Keogh's (2019) claim that cultural

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<sup>4</sup> User base by age group: under 9 (20%), 9–12 (20%), 13–16 (16%), 17–24 (25%), and 25+ (19%; Roblox Corporation, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> These mods were based on *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation, 1998) and *Warcraft III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002), fueling controversies over intellectual property that eventually ended in a takeover by Valve.

software, such as engines and platforms, essentially “enrol constituents into governed ecosystems—ecosystems that obscure their governing through discourses of democratization, empowerment, openness, and user-friendliness” (p. 116).

### ***Platforms and Engines: Rationalization of Cultural Production***

Roblox (Roblox Corporation, 2006) games are mostly developed in small teams, which is in line with how most games are made today. Contrary to the perceived dominance of large studios in the games industry, most game development happens in teams of “five or less workers, working in highly precarious and piecemeal circumstances that look less like established tech companies and more like garage bands” (Keogh & Hardwick, 2024, p. 817). While large multinational corporations in North America, Europe, and East Asia are highly visible, most game developers work in small indie teams using commercial engines such as Unity and Unreal and publish through distribution platforms such as Apple’s App Store and Valve’s Steam (Keogh, 2023). Working conditions in indie studios are often precarious yet are romanticized as entrepreneurial (Lipkin, 2019; Ruffino, 2020). Indie development also occurs outside the studio structure, by “everyday game makers” who seek creative autonomy by working on games part-time as a side gig to their main job, often as a transition to becoming independent developers who bear all the risks, costs, and legal responsibilities (Young, 2024).

This precariousness is evident in the digital games industry, which is notorious for its aggressive publishing strategies that often lead to “crunch”—large development teams working excessive hours to meet deadlines for investors (Bulut, 2020; O’Donnell, 2014; Weststar & Dubois, 2023). This practice persists despite criticisms from within the industry, with thousands of workers periodically laid off once products are released and less labor is needed for maintenance. Beyond job instability, pervasive and exploitative labor practices, such as overtime experienced by 27% of employed and 38% of self-employed developers (Weststar & Lentini, 2024),<sup>6</sup> have become an ingrained part of game developer identity. Problematically, crunch is often perceived as a natural and unavoidable aspect of development (Cote & Harris, 2021), illustrating how precarity—a “systemic, accelerated, and chronic instability” (Banks, 2019, p. 542)—is not merely corporate exploitation, defined as a relationship where asymmetric power enables one party to appropriate another’s resources for its own benefit (Wood, 2016), but follows a historical trajectory of worker identity intertwined with creativity and meaning, recast through entrepreneurialism.

This pursuit of creative autonomy exists in tension with game development’s rationalized production infrastructures: While AAA studios coordinate production through department structures, indie and everyday game making also organize workflows around standards often set by commercial game engines. Game engines are software frameworks that provide foundational tools for creating and distributing virtual environments across various platforms and hardware (Foxman, 2019). They are crucial in coordinating diverse elements of the development cycle, encompassing design, artistic creation, coding, and project oversight (Banks, 2013). Such tools come together through the engine’s graphical user interface, which runs in tandem and conjunction with underlying systems that operate largely behind the scenes, including graphics processing units, physics engines, network utilities, and compilers (Malazita, 2024).

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<sup>6</sup> Reported in the International Game Developer Association’s (2023) Developers Satisfaction Survey.

Beyond structuring development through established design practices and production workflows, game engines also establish developer dependence and achieve market leadership through strategic forms of interoperability with other digital content creation tools, formats, and distribution platforms (Foxman, 2019). For example, while Roblox Studio (Roblox Corporation, 2012) allows developers to use Figma for user interaction (UI) design and Blender for animation, the engine is platform-native—restricting games created in its engine to exclusive distribution through the platform.

Game development is increasingly platformized in terms of both production and distribution through commercial game engines, as well as orchestration across teams and outsourcing contracts. Across different categories of platform work (see Vallas & Schor, 2020), platform infrastructures extract value by “cut[ting] into the chain” of labor supply and demand (Kushner, 2013, p. 1249, as cited in Gandini, 2019, p. 1044). They do so through economic infrastructures (Richardson, 2024) that coordinate worker and consumer interactions rather than exerting direct control over the labor process.

Control over platform workers emerges in a “fluid context whereby the fixed employer-employee relationship has been replaced with a new kind of flexible structure” (Gandini, 2019, p. 1044). Drawing from a longer history of worker surveillance, algorithmic management on labor platforms uses data-driven techniques of remote worker control such as ratings, behavioral nudges, and scheduling prompts (Rosenblat, 2018). For example, Uber drivers must maintain a 4.6–5-star rating from customers to avoid having their account revoked (Gandini, 2019). Like other food delivery platforms, Meituan Waimai uses estimated time of arrival algorithms—stipulating in advance when couriers should finish a delivery—to manage couriers as “movable scooters” rather than as human workers navigating unpredictable urban settings (Li, 2024, p. 3183). As with other forms of algorithmic management in on-demand labor platforms, Angela Li (2024) emphasizes that the rigorous time discipline imposed by these algorithms is nonetheless experienced by couriers as a flexible space in which to exercise their agency. As a labor platform, Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) also algorithmically manages workers, but through monetization systems that are also experienced as flexible and allowing for meaningful forms of agency. However, as our analysis suggests, these forms of agency seem to compound the very exploitative and precarious conditions they are meant to circumvent.

## Methods

Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) platform workers were recruited from Discord servers dedicated to development on the platform. These servers include Developer Recruiting Hub,<sup>7</sup> Hidden Devs | Roblox,<sup>8</sup> and RoDevs—Roblox Developers,<sup>9</sup> the latter two of which are regarded as the most popular servers for discussing and finding work on Roblox projects. The first author joined these three servers from October to December 2024, during which consent was obtained from community representatives to conduct the study. After multiple attempts to recruit participants, we were advised by community representatives to reach out to members via direct messaging. Ninety-seven users were contacted, and 17 agreed to

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<sup>7</sup> Total membership count of 2,771.

<sup>8</sup> Total membership count of 182,340.

<sup>9</sup> Total membership count of 88,317.

participate. Six participants were based in the United States, and the rest were based in Algeria, Armenia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, Egypt, Germany, India, the Philippines, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The participants were between 13 and 24 years old; age-appropriate information sheets were used for participants under 18, and additional informed consent was obtained from their parents or guardians.

Semistructured interviews were conducted between November 2024 and January 2025 and lasted 30–90 minutes. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences developing Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) games, covering topics such as their roles, day-to-day operations, and how they financed their activities and earned income from game development. Additionally, participants were asked about their relationship with Roblox Corporation in relation to monetization, regulation, and promotional partnerships. The interview material was analyzed using an abductive approach to thematic analysis (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Braun & Clark, 2021), facilitated by the qualitative analysis software program Dedoose. This process began by identifying key themes and participant attitudes. After initial coding, where multiple codes could be assigned to the same segment of text, we analyzed code occurrences and co-occurrences to identify, define, and name overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Analysis of the 17 interviews yielded 61 codes with 623 excerpts, which were initially sorted into seven categories. Further analysis led to several themes. For the purposes of this article, we focus on three themes: (1) developers' use of monetary workarounds and informal practices to navigate platform constraints, (2) experiences of financial precarity and risk under platform-mediated game development, and (3) the tendency toward derivative and trend-driven forms of game production. Codes and themes were iteratively formulated through the examination of excerpts, diagramming, memo writing, and synthesis of scholarly literature to form a set of arguments illustrated with representative quotations in the sections that follow.

## Findings

### ***Play Money Redux: Working Around the Platform***

Monetization systems and their virtual economies have been researched in the context of multiplayer online games since the 2000s (see Castronova, 2008; Lehdonvirta, 2008). Julian Dibbell (2006) used the concept of "play money" to highlight the real-world value of virtual currencies and items, further blurring ideological and institutional divisions between work and play. The primary purpose of virtual economies in online games is not always direct revenue generation but also social and engagement objectives: rewarding referrals, incentivizing contributions, allocating resources, locking players into a platform, and guiding their interactions within it (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014). For example, the pursuit of material accumulation within virtual economies creates dramatic tension in the form of speculation and competition over virtual goods and resources, which encourages engaging forms of stratification and solidarity within player bases (Taylor et al., 2015). Compared with real-world economies, online games are less bound by resource scarcity, allowing developers to focus on addressing noneconomic problems through economic means. Virtual economies are a key mechanism for cultivating emergent content and regulating player participation in online games (Milik & Webber, 2020).

Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) also leverages monetization systems to regulate engagement. Roblox extends beyond a simple in-game currency for virtual items by offering conversion into real-world

cash through DevEx, thereby directly encouraging real-money trading rather than prohibiting it. Robux acts as a platformwide metacurrency, enabling players to purchase game-specific advantages (Game Passes), allowing developers to acquire a range of developer-created assets (Creator Store),<sup>10</sup> and letting them compensate each other for their work (Groups).<sup>11</sup> Roblox aims to facilitate team-based game development and revenue sharing through its Groups feature, where developers ideally receive monthly Robux payments based on agreed percentages of game income, akin to corporate budget codes. This design envisions shared revenue and risk among collaborators.

However, the reality for many developers involves contract-based work, enabled through workarounds to this intended structure. Instead of leveraging Groups, developers often resort to using Game Passes for one-time transactions, despite this being a monetization tool primarily designed for players to buy in-game perks. Alternatively, many avoid the Robux economy entirely, opting for direct fiat payments via platforms such as PayPal. Additionally, the Creator Store within Roblox Studio (Roblox Corporations, 2012) allows developers to buy or sell assets such as scripts or UI designs, contributing to a decentralized payment flow that contradicts Roblox's (Roblox Corporations, 2006) preferred group-based system and ultimately makes developer compensation less structured and more transactional.

The platform's transactional dynamics set the stage for Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) players, including children, to be drawn into the Robux economy. In line with journalistic reporting (Latham, 2023), many participants in the study were in their early teens when they began paying for various playable Experiences with Robux. At the time of writing, players can buy Robux through the Roblox app or browser, with the cheapest option costing \$5 for 500 Robux. Alternatively, they can subscribe to Roblox Premium for \$10, which provides 1,000 Robux per month and a 35% bonus on additional purchases. Importantly, unlike in other online games, there is no way to earn Robux through gameplay. Robux can only be earned by developing and publishing a game or creating and selling game assets or 2D virtual cosmetic items for avatars, thereby drawing and locking players into the platform as creators. As seen below, almost all participants got started with Roblox development to cover the costs of playing:

Yeah. So basically, when I was younger, [. . .] I asked my parents to buy me Robux, they just straight up said, "No, we don't want you to spend money on virtual items." So I was going on YouTube. I was going through videos, like how to make Robux. And then this one thing came up, like how to make Roblox clothing. (Participant E, 2D clothing creator)

As this participant explains, children who are financially dependent yet restricted by their parents from in-app spending often have little choice, but to turn to game development to sustain their play. Other participants were drawn into development through ambitions to create their own games or build on existing ones. However, like many young Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) developers, several participants' youthful attempts at going solo led to commercial failures or unfinished products. Many of these young

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<sup>10</sup> The Creator Store, which also stocks official assets created by Roblox Corporation, is distinct from Roblox Marketplace, which sells avatar items that can be displayed across the entire platform.

<sup>11</sup> Groups offer one-time payouts that come with contractual safeguards, hold periods, and administrative overheads.

people follow the trajectory of Chris Young's (2024) everyday game makers, moving from solo development to seeking partners in the development community to collaborate on passion projects. Most participants worked in small development teams of five to six people, while others worked in larger teams of up to 17 members. These teams often included a mix of scripters, animators, modelers, UI designers, and sound designers.

The Roblox Creator Hub (Roblox Corporations, 2006) supports team-based development by offering advice and connecting developers. It includes DevEx (for converting Robux to USD) and the Creator Store (for trading assets). Though intended to foster collaboration, developers often view the Hub as exploitative because of Roblox's disproportionate cut of transactions. Participants most commonly pointed to the 30% DevEx fee. As one user experience (UX) designer explained:

Let's say I cash out 3 million Robux a year; that is, like, let me calculate, 3 million, that is like \$12,000, right. But if I rely on Roblox, I will get \$9,000 or less; like, this is a grand loss of \$3,000, which is a quite valuable amount, so I'm not gonna give up on that.  
(Participant J, UX designer)

While this commission represents a significant deduction, it captures only part of Roblox's (Roblox Corporations, 2006) broader value extraction. Before the 30% exchange fee, creators are also subject to a 30% cut on all transactions from in-game purchases, as well as asset purchases made on Marketplace and Creator Store. Faced with this extractive exchange rate and platform fees, many Roblox developers bypass the Robux economy, preferring to collaborate through unofficial community hubs such as Discord servers,<sup>12</sup> including those used to recruit participants for this study.

Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) developers identified compounding ways in which the platform worked against them. For many participants, the punishing exchange rate and commissions did not simply curtail earnings; they also undermined their original motivation to develop games and assets in the first place—to fund their play of Roblox Experiences. While some participants identified as developers, very few considered themselves successful because of their inability to sustain their own play. This parallels other creative professions, such as journalists (Foxman & Nieborg, 2016) or fans as hobbyist programmers (Nielsen & Nani, 2021) in the digital games industry, where employment instability and precarity erode claims to occupational identities. To remain economically viable on the platform, some participants found themselves working on others' projects, taking on commissioned work with the hope of eventually developing their own games. These participants were compelled by the need for Robux to sideline their own passion projects or hobbyist practices for more revenue-driven approaches to game making. This structural disempowerment stands in sharp contrast to the economic opportunity touted by Roblox Studio head Stefano Corazza (Tapsell, 2024). The promises of education and flexibility draw on contemporary game development's democratization discourse (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019; Whitson, 2019) to legitimize extractive platform structures. Instead of democratizing cultural production and creativity, Roblox cultivates a financialized response to precariousness that produces the opposite outcome: a culture

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<sup>12</sup> Developer Recruiting Hub, Hidden Devs | Roblox, and RoDevs—Roblox Developers.

of shovelware marked by the recycling of assets and mechanics according to monetization logics rather than creative imperatives.

***A Very Complicated Version of Precarity: Financialized Platform Labor***

These workarounds to Roblox's (Roblox Corporations, 2006) collaboration, transaction, and discoverability features only tell half the story of how developers make do with the platform's extractive structures. Like other on-demand labor platforms discussed in the literature review, Roblox centralizes its power over the production pipeline, organizing labor into discrete tasks brokered through its multisided marketplace. This centralized platform power channels developers through, rather than simply around, the Roblox economy, incentivizing financialized calculations in production and speculation on currencies.

This financialized approach to game development is distinct from the entrepreneurial rationalizations of precarity that are characteristic of creative labor in the games industry. The use of entrepreneurialism to rationalize precarious working conditions is part of what David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011) call a "complicated version of freedom" (p. 157)—a concept highlighting the paradoxical nature of work in cultural industries such as music or television, where perceived autonomy and passion often mask undesirable working conditions. This freedom commonly translates into compliance with exploitation and has been critiqued as a form of self-exploitation (Keogh, 2021), driven by blurred work-life boundaries and the pursuit of nonmonetary rewards, alongside intense insecurity, depressed wages, and compulsory socializing. Ultimately, individuals are compelled to, or willingly, accept these challenging realities as an investment in their craft and careers.

Unlike the cultural industries studied by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) developers experience precarity not as an entrepreneurial challenge to be navigated between various firms and clients, but as a condition inherent to operating within a closed system or platform. Roblox is not only platform-native in the sense that the engine restricts developers to distribute their games on the platform but also because the platform itself provides an audience and marketing. This makes Roblox distinctive from other digital game distribution platforms, as it concentrates its platform power (Nieborg et al., 2021) across the entire game development process, including the pre- and postproduction pipeline. According to one participant, this makes Roblox more of a creator economy platform such as TikTok than a game distribution platform such as Steam:

Roblox is, in terms of distribution, closer to TikTok than it is to Steam. I don't have to generate external knowledge of my game. I don't have to advertise. I don't have to get content creators [for promotion]. All I have to do is make a good game and get a bare minimum number of players so that Roblox can determine my analytics. And as long as my game is good, which, in my case, it always is because I design it for this purpose, it gets on the Roblox algorithm, and Roblox puts it on the front page. (Participant H, creative director)

Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) platformizes game development by vertically integrating production and locking creators into a centralized system brokered by its extractive commission structure,

exchange rate, and algorithmically opaque distribution channel. The precarity experienced by Roblox developers is less about finding and sustaining work as autonomous agents in the music industry (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011) or rationalizing unpaid overwork, crunch, and layoffs as part of vocational trade-offs in the digital games industry (Keogh, 2021). Instead, precarity in Roblox is more about complying with inequitable algorithmic recommendation systems and contending with extractive collaboration and transaction systems as locked-in producers. There are some parallels with creator economy platforms such as TikTok, as noted above by the participant. However, while content created for TikTok can be reposted (with watermarks) to other short-form video platforms, games built using Roblox's proprietary engine and Lua scripting cannot be exported and are locked in—exclusively published and run within the Roblox ecosystem.

Even as locked-in and precarious producers, participants did communicate a sense of agency—not quite as entrepreneurs navigating a cultural field, but as taskified labor for other development teams brokered through the Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) platform. As previously discussed, some participants engaged in commissioned work on others' projects to earn Robux in the hopes of eventually funding their own games. Participants saw this kind of work as taking place within a low-stakes environment, where young developers have a startup mentality that encourages experimentation despite probable failure. For example, encouraged by college professors to pursue voice acting on Roblox, one participant describes what makes Roblox attractive compared with other gig work platforms such as Voices.com and Freelancer.com:

These kids, right, there are also young adults, who are just starting out, they don't have much experience, right. They're learning business experience and everything, so I basically started charging people for it. [ . . . ] So my voiceover experience has been propelled by Roblox because of the low-stakes environment where everyone's trying new things. (Participant F, voice actor)

This participant sees their labor as low-stakes because it is more taskified on Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) than on platforms like Voices.com, which connect businesses seeking voice talent with professional voice actors. As young adults just starting out, rather than taking on commissioned projects from established businesses, developers produce components that Roblox coordinates algorithmically across its interconnected ecosystems of users, applications, and databases. This kind of taskification is key to platform labor, which involves breaking down complex human activities into standardized, fragmented elements, often reduced to the smallest unit of execution (Casilli & Posada, 2019).

This taskification of platform labor is distinct from how cultural industries rely on a reservoir of labor providing a readily available and exploitable supply of new talent or how large studios in the games industry rely on "a much wider spectrum of informal creative labour" (Keogh, 2019, p. 19) as outsourcing vendors or contingent workers for phases of production. Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) does not merely draw from an existing external labor reservoir; it actively structures and governs all work within its closed platform, coordinating transactions within its multisided marketplace according to its own rates and rules.

Even in Roblox's (Roblox Corporations, 2006) low-stakes environment, risk is not taken head on. As discussed, Roblox developers typically receive compensation through one-time commissions or monthly Robux payments via the Groups feature, based on a percentage of the income gained by their Experience. This monthly payment model functions as a revenue share and can be quite lucrative as passive income if the game turns a profit. However, participants we interviewed saw this form of risk as undesirable:

What the game is making itself, they get a cut from that, like just investing in the game, or developers agreeing to be paid in percentage [rather] than a lump sum. . . . The most popular would be direct payment because it's very risky if you get paid in percentage because there's no chance of the game succeeding or it's very likely that it would fail, like it would not get popular. (Participant A, executive assistant)

The precarity associated with Roblox's (Roblox Corporations, 2006) centralization of platform power cultivates an attitude toward risk that is less entrepreneurial and more opportunistic and transactional. This aversion to risk in remuneration complicates the normalization of risk in the platform's "low-stakes" gig prospecting discussed in the previous section. Thus, Roblox's platformization of cultural production detracts from the venture labor that defined tech labor in the wake of the 1990s dotcom boom and bust. Venture labor describes how employees invest personal resources such as time, energy, and human capital into their companies, effectively embodying entrepreneurial values and sharing in organizational risks without being owners (Neff, 2012). This concept captures how individuals perceive their work not merely as a source of wages, but as a personal investment with future payoffs and a subjective embrace of associated risks—attitudes that elude the Roblox developer. Roblox developers are not venture laborers, but transactional producers. This transactional approach to risk circumvents the platform's ostensible attempts to cultivate longer-term collaboration and profit sharing, leading to more precarious working conditions.

The precarious working conditions shaped by the platform's extractive collaboration, transaction, and opaque discoverability systems catalyze a transactional approach to risk that pushes developers toward short-term monetization tactics. This manifests in opportunistic practices such as buying assets, copying the code, and reselling them on third-party asset stores. These practices constitute a mode of derivative game production characterized by the replication of existing assets and mechanics, prioritizing monetization over the development of original games. As a result, they contribute to the increased circulation of what is commonly described as shovelware.

### ***Derivative Game Production***

To understand the consequences of these conditions on cultural production more broadly, Andrew deWaard's (2024) concept of derivative media provides a useful framework. deWaard (2024) explores how cultural texts such as films, television shows, and songs are internally financialized. This means the texts themselves are formally structured according to financial logics and are designed with copious references to other media and brands within a monetizable catalog. These texts are, in effect, securitized for maximizing profit from intellectual property portfolios. There has been a growing influence of financial markets, firms,

and instruments on the media industries. Derivative media is the outcome or manifestation of financialization within cultural industries and their products.

This collection of references within a text can be seen as a security—a pool of intertextual and promotional connections that can be leveraged and exploited for financial return. By reducing reliance on a single text's financial performance, media conglomerates spread risk across their portfolios by embedding advertisements within the text itself. This conditions viewers to engage with advertisements rather than skip them or disengage during ad breaks. This referential economy exemplifies how financialization is enacted through media intertextuality, effectively rendering media texts as assets for speculation. The value of these textual assets can be speculated on and exchanged, a practice deWaard (2024) describes as "the derivative logic of a financial futures market" (p. 162).

While deWaard (2024) understands derivative media as a top-down strategy used by media corporations to deliberately create derivative texts to hedge risk, the Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) case reveals how similar dynamics emerge from the bottom up as individual developers adapt to precarious platform labor conditions. Specifically, shovelware—a financially and creatively derivative form of cultural text—is a bottom-up response to Roblox's platform strategies of concentrated power, experienced by developers as precarious conditions, as previously discussed.

Shovelware is a rising concern for consumers in the digital games industry. Originally associated with mobile games, the phenomenon has spread to console and PC, with digital game stores such as the PlayStation Store being called out for relaxing their content curation (Blake, 2025; Valentine, 2025; Zwiezen, 2024). Young (2021) recalls a Unity instructor at the 2015 annual Unity Roadshow claiming that

Game makers would use Unity's prefabricated assets to release games on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store without making any modifications to the predesigned game. The Unity instructor even went so far as to say, "Plagiarize all you want!" (p. 152)

Similarly, many participants note the predominance of "shovelware" and "eslop" on the Roblox platform (Roblox Corporations, 2006). Shovelware and eslop refer to ostensibly cheap, low-quality video games produced with the intent of attracting unsuspecting buyers. One participant explained:

In Roblox, actually quite a few games literally are duplicates of another. Roblox doesn't care; I mean they probably try to remove the bigger ones. Like if you make a copy of Adopt Me, which is the biggest game on Roblox, they'll probably do something about that. But it's quite a disadvantage for the medium-sized developers. And they don't have the resources to really take it up. Whereas the developers behind Adopt Me, or the top 200 developers, usually have these premium relationships with Roblox, right, where they're in constant communication with Roblox probably because they generate a 10th of all Roblox's revenue I think, I don't know. (Participant Q, business manager)

All participants raised the issue of copied games and intellectual property in one way or another, suggesting how derivative logics in platformized cultural production are negotiated in ambivalent ways. On the one hand, these practices circumvent the perceived exploitative and precarious infrastructure expressed through currency conversion and fees; on the other hand, participants critique the proliferation of derivative game production on the platform, which emerges from the same conditions.

Rather than being limited to copies of official game titles (Davies & Hjorth, 2024), the issue extends more broadly to include copies of original Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) games as well as assets available for sale on third-party websites. While the Roblox Creator Hub offers a tool called Rights Manager to report copied creations, many developers avoid using the DevEx payout option, meaning they are not officially recognized as part of a development team in the owner's Creation Hub profile and thus fall outside Roblox's terms of use. Instead, they send code, animations, audio files, and UI samples to the buyer, making them vulnerable to fraud, as explained below:

It's hard to find a lot of creative people like with their own scripts, just from my experience. Like when I first started, I created a military group, and I obviously bought assets because I didn't have the knowledge back then. I bought two of the same [assets] because I just wanted to see the difference, and like the code was relatively the same, so I don't know if the seller actually bought the previous system and changed it up a little bit or if they're reselling it. But I think with Roblox there's a lot of creativity, but there's also the side where a lot of people don't really get creative; they just use other people's stuff, and they just mark it as theirs on the side where they try to make money. But it's not their work, which angers me a little bit. (Participant I, programmer)

Shovelware may seem opportunistic and exploitative, but it can also be understood as an attempt to grapple with a system that prioritizes the use of assets for financial speculation over creative construction. This contrasts with the earlier participant's claim that games that cater to the Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) algorithm get featured. By comparison, other participants claimed that most featured games are copies.

Ultimately, what deWaard (2024) describes as the securitization of cultural production is, in the context of the Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) platform, better understood as a reallocation of risk rather than its distribution—where distribution would imply a reduction of risk through portfolio diversification. Instead, Roblox unfolds as a sequence of risk-averse activities: first, by corporate entities as platform owners who extract infrastructure tolls rather than relying on product success, and second, by developers who resort to producing derivative media in the form of shovelware to navigate a transactional development culture. Risk, once assumed by entrepreneurs and large enterprises—who traditionally justified their share of revenue by portraying themselves as risk takers—is increasingly shifted onto workers, who historically traded risk for wage stability. Roblox developers navigate this reallocation of risk through gig work by, for example, circumventing the official DevEx system. The shovelware industry can be understood as a parallel response to capital's broader reorganization of labor. In other words, as platforms restructure risk, developers increasingly redirect their efforts into speculative financial ventures (Haiven, 2014).

### Conclusion

The article argues that the Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) platform shapes user-created game development into a financialized system driven by monetary workarounds and speculative gain rather than creative passion, exacerbating precarious conditions for developers and the proliferation of shovelware, a form of derivative media. This shift is facilitated by Roblox's closed ecosystem, which centralizes control over game creation via proprietary tools like Roblox Studio (Roblox Corporations, 2012) and extractive commissions on monetization and exchange through its virtual currency, Robux. This centralized and extractive structure, combined with opaque algorithmic recommendation systems, nudges young developers—often drawn to Roblox game development to earn Robux for their own gameplay—away from creative passion projects toward revenue-driven development practices. Rather than embracing the form of venture labor common in the games industry, where individuals assume risk for future payoffs, Roblox developers are transactional producers who largely prefer direct lump-sum payments over percentage-based profit sharing because of the high likelihood of game failure. This transactional approach to production extends beyond remuneration tactics that bypass Roblox's official collaboration and payment systems to the creation of derivative media content, effectively turning the cultural text into a site of precaritized speculation.

Linking these financialized development practices to the growth of shovelware shows how creators respond to platform-related uncertainties, such as volatile algorithmic exposure and unstable virtual currencies, by turning them into speculative financial projects (Haiven, 2014). The practices of Roblox (Roblox Corporations, 2006) developers complicate Nicoll and Keogh's (2019) notion of the democratization dispositif. While criticisms of "asset flipping" and "indieapocalypse" arose alongside the democratization of game development, ideologically prescribing what counted as a legitimate game and a real developer, the case of Roblox underlines the pragmatic substrate of the democratization dispositif. Democratization emerges through Roblox's platform not as creative construction, but as financialized opportunism conditioned by precarity and oriented toward derivative cultural production. Our analysis challenges claims made by studio head Stefano Corazza about Roblox as an accessible entrepreneurial platform for learning a craft and earning an income. Instead of facilitating creativity and entrepreneurialism, Roblox conditions developers into transactional development practices to churn out derivative cultural commodities oriented toward short-term value creation.

Operating within platform-driven uncertainty, where outcomes are unpredictable rather than merely risky in a calculable sense (Halpern & Mitchell, 2023), developers adopt financialized tactics and mentalities, reshaping the dynamics of cultural production. This marks a turn from the commodity logic of cultural production toward financialization, where workers are increasingly required to balance "the needs of budget and creative meaning" (deWaard, 2024, p. 173), a responsibility previously reserved for producers and executives, at least in large-scale media production.

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