Research Note (4): From Play to Platform

Video Games as Ecosystems

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"Play is just the starting point." — Joost van Dreunen

Joost van Dreunen, in his SuperJoost Playlist on Substack, recently observed that video games have grown far beyond their roots as an entertainment medium. No longer confined to play alone, video games are platforms for a wide range of online activities, from social interaction and education to commerce and user-generated content (Van Dreunen, 2024). This *research note* explores how video games have transformed into multifaceted digital spaces that are fast becoming the foundation of broad digital ecosystems.

The Shifting Role of Games

Titles such as *Roblox*, *Minecraft*, and *Fortnite* exemplify the shift from single-purpose entertainment to dynamic platforms. These platforms represent a break from the traditional developer-driven model, allowing players to actively shape environments and experiences. In Roblox, for example, users not only play but also create games, design virtual worlds, and engage in entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, Fortnite has expanded from its original gameplay into hosting concerts and social events, transforming itself into more than just a game.

Platforms are integral components of the metaverse. These virtual worlds now encompass social events, virtual commerce, and content creation, reflecting real-world economic patterns. For instance, Fortnite's concerts serve as hubs for social interaction. At the same time, Roblox empowers users to create and monetize in-game assets, turning the platform into a space for innovation and business ventures. This shift demonstrates that gaming has far exceeded its initial scope and now plays a broader role in the digital economy.

Historically, games were designed to entertain, with developers maintaining control over the content. However, platforms like Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite are redefining this relationship by enabling users to create, customize, and commercialize their work. Game engines like Unity and Unreal have facilitated this shift, giving players the ability to design highly interactive and visually complex environments (Chia, 2022). This broader transformation suggests that gaming now integrates more deeply with digital culture, reflecting changes in how individuals interact with technology.

Immersion Beyond Gameplay

Immersion in video games, once defined by mechanics and world-building, now extends into social and economic realms. Fortnite regularly hosts virtual concerts, transforming the gaming experience into a form of collective entertainment. Similarly, Roblox offers a diverse set of user-generated environments, creating a space for social interaction beyond the game's original scope.
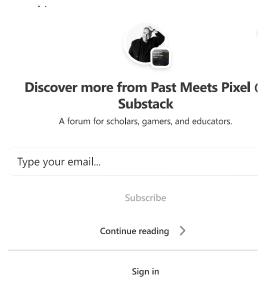
Game engines like Unity and Unreal have found applications in industries outside of gaming, such as architecture and urban planning. These engines provide tools for creating virtual environments with impressive fidelity, which has significant implications for the broader vision of the metaverse. Within this interconnected digital ecosystem, games serve as nodes for socialization, commerce, and creative activity. Gaming platforms are thus more than

entertainment spaces; they are the starting point for a range of experiences th[...]
different industries and societal functions.

The concept of the metaverse envisions users seamlessly moving between digi[...]
forefront of this shift are platforms like Roblox and Fortnite, which offer imm[...]
combining socialization, commerce, and creativity. However, to realize the me[...]
platforms need to develop open standards that allow for seamless transitions a[...]
interoperability between different virtual worlds. Without these, the risk of m[...]
fragmentation and loss of user autonomy could hinder further expansion.

User Agency and Virtual Economies

User agency has become central to modern gaming, with players actively shap[...]
environments they inhabit. Virtual economies within games like Minecraft an[...]
how players are no longer passive consumers but active creators and entrepre[...]
platforms provide opportunities for players to design, build, and sell in-game [...]
transforming gaming into an arena for economic activity as well as entertainm[...]

Bhardwaj (2024) argues that the gamification of commerce is transforming virtual experiences
into real-world economic opportunities. Gamers are increasingly building careers by designing
in-game items or developing new gameplay features. This marks a significant shift from the past
when developers controlled all aspects of game content. Today, platforms enable users to
monetize their creativity, further blurring the line between work and play, as virtual economies
now mirror real-world financial systems. However, as Chia (2022) notes, these virtual economies
also raise issues of interoperability and standardization. For the metaverse to function
cohesively, platforms must adopt open standards that allow for seamless communication across
virtual worlds. Without such standards, market consolidation and diminished user agency could
limit the potential of these digital spaces.

User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-generated content (UGC) is at the heart of gaming's shift from a closed system to an open,
user-driven platform. Games like Roblox and Minecraft have thrived on the creativity of their
player bases, allowing users to design and share custom environments, gameplay, and virtual
items. UGC has provided players with an unprecedented level of autonomy in shaping their
gaming experiences.

Kasapakis and Gavalas (2016) suggest that UGC not only enhances engagement but also
diversifies the gaming experience. By empowering players to create, share, and explore custom
content, platforms like Roblox foster a culture of creativity and innovation. The limitations set
by developers no longer bind players, but they are free to build their own stories, games, and
virtual economies, transforming the gaming landscape into a space of boundless potential.

Risi et al. (2012) emphasize that the combination of UGC and procedural content generation
allows for more dynamic and collaborative social gaming environments. These systems enable
players to contribute value not only for themselves but also for the broader community. As games
continue their transformation into platforms, this collaborative creativity is poised to expand,
reinforcing van Dreunen's assertion that "play is just the starting point."

Games, the Next Digital Frontier

The impact of gaming's expansion goes far beyond its initial role as a source of entertainment.
Games are increasingly becoming platforms for social, economic, and creative activities,
merging play with work and everyday life. This raises important questions about the future of
gaming: Will these platforms democratize content creation and make digital spaces more
inclusive? Or will they introduce new challenges, such as increased regulation and the need for
enhanced content moderation?

Platforms that facilitate a broad range of experiences, blurring the boundaries between virtual and real-world interactions, will likely shape the future of gaming. In this context, van Dreunen's (2024) assertion that "play is just the starting point" captures the shift in focus. Games are no longer limited to entertainment; they are becoming foundational spaces where participation, creativity, and commerce converge. This convergence will undoubtedly shape the digital spaces of the future.

Concluding Thoughts

The transformation of gaming from a form of entertainment into a platform for diverse activities signals a new era. Games now serve as spaces for social interaction, user-generated content, virtual economies, and creative expression. As platforms like Roblox, Fortnite, and Minecraft continue to grow, they offer a glimpse into the future—one where user agency and participation take center stage. The boundaries between the digital and physical worlds will continue to blur, driven by advances in game engines such as Unity and Unreal. In this new epoch, games will no longer be viewed as pastimes; they will be the cornerstone of the next phase of our digital lives, enabling a wide array of human experiences within connected, immersive environments.

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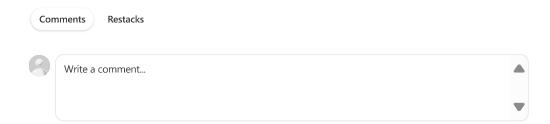
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