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Game Over? Litigation, Liability, and the Future of Online Youth Safety

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On Feb 12th, 2025, a lawsuit was filed against technology companies Roblox Inc. and Discord Inc. claiming a 13-year-old boy was harassed, groomed, and eventually sexually exploited on these platforms due, in part, to the lack of safety measures in place to keep him safe [1]. This story is one of many that have occurred over the past decade, with the rise of social media, online video gaming, and other digital communication platforms, and their increased use by people of all ages [2]. The victimization of minors online is not new, but popular applications such as Roblox and Discord, among others, present unique avenues for potential contact, grooming, and exploitation. This article will explore Roblox and Discord in particular, their potential to victimize minors, what the future might hold amid legal battles in this technological space, and potential solutions to safeguard vulnerable online populations.

First, I discuss the aforementioned application, Roblox. Roblox is a multiplayer online video game available on phones, computers, and gaming consoles. It involves players creating or joining "servers," where the game objective varies widely, but most offer some level of social engagement with players of all ages. Roblox is extremely popular and growing, boasting about 151 million daily active users, 45.2 million of which are from the US and Canada alone [3]. Of the 151 million, about 50 million are 13 years old or younger, accounting for roughly one-third of all users [3]. This large player base is significantly higher than the 54 million total gamers in 2022 [3]. Unlike other popular games such as Fortnite or Minecraft, which are also played by millions of people of all ages, Roblox's robust chat room sets it apart. Much like early chatroom applications and websites, that allowed strangers to communicate anonymously, Roblox has a similar feature, allowing players to talk with each other freely both on the server and via direct messaging. This has reportedly been a conduit for victimization, with difficulty in identifying the perpetrator due to Roblox historically only needing a username, password, and date of birth. Roblox allows purchase in-game items and cosmetics, which have been reportedly used as part of coercion tactics in exchange for sexually

explicit images of the victim or other info [1]. Online perpetrators who use only the Roblox chat feature as a vector cannot send or request images, so they use other applications, such as Snapchat, Kik, or Discord, that allow data exchange. Of these, Discord, an online communication platform closely tied to video gaming, has allowed users, via computer or smartphone, to text, talk, send images/media, or stream to friends or other users, and has enabled the creation of servers for both public and private use. Multiple cases have surfaced in which perpetrators will find potential victims on Roblox, transition communication to Discord or other similar platforms, and exploit the victim by sending unwanted sexual material, solicitation of sexually explicit media from the victim, or gathering of information for future in-person contact [6]. Discord has also been implicated in the sharing of child pornography and child abuse sexual material (CSAM) through dedicated servers. [6]

There has been an increase in legal action taken against large tech companies due to the growing concern that these platforms are placing youth at risk for reported addiction and sexual exploitation, including Texas and Louisiana Attorney Generals filing suit against Roblox and a Roblox multidistrict litigation (MDL) class action suit filed and pending litigation [4, 5, 7, 8]. These lawsuits allege that tech companies, like Roblox, are enabling harm by failing to enforce safety standards, monitor content, or warn users and parents [4]. Discord has also been the target of lawsuits, including one by the New Jersey Attorney General in 2025, alleging that Discord has falsely led consumers to believe it is safe for children despite inadequate safety features [9]. Although there has been historical difficulty in litigation against tech companies for cyber safety for what users do or upload due to section 230 of the Communications Act of 1934, only time will tell what comes of these new cases [10].

Both Roblox and Discord have recently begun implementing major changes to address safety concerns, such as Roblox requiring users to have AI perform “facial age estimation,” or ID checks [11]. This has had unintended effects, such as concerns about AI data storage and verified underage accounts being sold online on eBay [12]. The problem of digital exploitation and abuse likely requires a multimodal approach focusing on children and adolescents, their parents/guardians, perpetrators, and lawmakers. Educational solutions include educating minors about risky sites, assessing their use of these sites, and informing parents about types of parental controls. Additional approaches involve continued advocacy with lawmakers and assistance in informing them about the potential risks of certain applications. This could lead to promoting changes such as improved access to and visibility of safety features, hastening identification and removal of sexually explicit content for underage users, and possibly even revisiting laws such as Section 230 to increase accountability and reduce the level of legal immunity granted to these companies.

Citation:

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