

Roblox First Impressions MMO Family

In last week's MMO Family, we had the chance to talk to Roblox CEO David Baszucki and hear how he took a physics-based simulation program and turned it into a successful game design tool that's enabled players of all ages to build and explore an endless variety of game worlds.

But what exactly is Roblox? It's been compared to LEGO and Minecraft, but there's actually a lot more to it than that. In this week's MMO Family, we'll dive into the game for some first impressions and explore why everyone, both young and old, should check it out!

The twitterific description of Roblox is that it's a virtual construction set inspired by robots and blocks (the game's name is a combination of the two). And when you first log in, it seems very simple -- almost too simple. You begin in an open yard with an inventory of items that you can place, move, and stack, and it's all pretty straightforward.

If you decide to build, you can access your inventory (it's the first key on your hotbar) and then place any number of objects in your world. In addition to the typical colored blocks, there are categories for landscape objects, holiday-themed objects, vehicles, and even traps. More sophisticated builders will enjoy toying around with wiring and circuits to build all sorts of machines and traps. And if you're aiming to make something really creative, you can download and use the Roblox Studio (Version 2.0 just arrived). It's a design program that uses the Lua programming language and allows players to branch out and create some impressive game worlds.

What I really enjoy the most about Roblox is seeing the thought behind the player-built worlds, particularly some of the FPS games. Some of the maps are very creative and show a meticulous effort to give every hill, building, and trench a purpose. It's a subtle thing, but the ability to conceptualize zone layouts can be key to making a game world that's fun. We've all experienced badly designed zones, cursed at misplaced barriers, and yelled at terrain that gets your player stuck. Surprisingly, many Roblox players get it right and are pretty darned good amateur game designers.

Another interesting element of Roblox is the currency exchange system. There are two types of currency: Robux and tickets. You earn tickets each time someone visits one of your worlds, or you can sell unique items you've created to other players. You can then use the tickets to purchase items from other players, or you can head to the Roblox Exchange on the site to trade them for Robux. Robux is the higher value currency; it allows you to purchase rarer items from the catalogue, including some that are Robux-only. Players set up their own exchange offers and decide the ticket-to-Robux ratio for each trade, so savvy traders can make a nice profit if they time things right and watch the market carefully.

On top of that, players also have the opportunity to create advertisements to market their worlds. They can use their tickets to create an ad and purchase a 24-hour time slot. The

more spent on the ad, and the better the ad design, the greater the chance it's selected from the total pool of ads for that day, and players who advertise increase their chances of players visiting their world, meaning more ticket revenue. Again, it's almost a game within a game, and those who play the market right can end up making a fortune.

With all of this user-generated content, you would think that Roblox runs the risk of players abusing things and creating inappropriate game worlds, but in the time I've spent playing, everything I've seen is family-friendly. As we heard last week from CEO David Baszucki, the team works hard to moderate and filter out inappropriate content and chat, but I also think that players are generally well-behaved because they respect the game and appreciate the tools that they're given to build and create. It's refreshing to see a game bestow on players that much freedom and not have it result in abuse, and I hope it's a signal to the industry that studios can relax their firm grip over their games and allow players a little more power to "leave their marks" in the virtual world.

Getting into Roblox involves a quick and easy registration, and you can then choose to enter and build, play someone else's game, or explore a player-made world. Free accounts get one world to build in, while upgraded member accounts get many more worlds as well as monthly Robux and access to a greater number of features.

Roblox often gets compared to Minecraft, and while both have block-style graphics and offer players the opportunity to build in-game worlds, I think Roblox has a depth to it that Minecraft does not. Roblox is part computer science, part game design, part multiplayer-game, and part lemonade stand. You can play the role of pizza maker, battle it out in a Call of Duty game map, attempt to survive the zombie apocalypse, or even try skateboarding. Or you can step back and try your hand at making and marketing a world of your own. Huliypin Minecraft and Roblox actually seem to be headed in different directions, so I think the differences will be even more stark down the road. Minecraft's recent updates have seemed to emphasize the game aspect with things like NPCs, potion making, cute critters, and enchanting. Meanwhile, Roblox seems focused on design features, like the new version of Roblox Studio and efforts to make the game playable on all platforms (it can currently be played on PCs and Macs, but the team is close to releasing a version for the iPad).

In short, Roblox is definitely a family-friendly game, but it doesn't oversimplify things just because kids are playing and designing in it. The team treats young players the same as adult players, and I think that actually encourages them to push harder and build things that are on par with their grown-up counterparts' creations. There really is no limit to what you can create, and it's a lot of fun to visit players' worlds and explore what they've made. Whether you're looking for a quick and fun game or looking to test your game design abilities, Roblox is worth checking out.

The MMO Family column is devoted to common issues with families and gaming. Every other week, Karen looks at current trends and ways to balance family life and play. She also shares her impressions of MMO titles to highlight which ones are child-friendly and which

ones offer great gaming experiences for young and old alike. You are welcome to send feedback or Wonka Bars to karen@massively.com.

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