

Human Trafficking and Online Gaming

Online gaming platforms, esports communities, and immersive virtual worlds can be misused by traffickers to communicate with children and adolescents, facilitate grooming, and initiate exploitation. As gaming has evolved from largely closed environments to highly social, interactive online spaces, new vulnerabilities have emerged that traffickers may exploit.

Increasing Online Threats

Police-recorded online grooming offences have risen substantially in recent years, while reports of suspected online child sexual abuse (including CSAM) submitted by platforms to the NCMEC CyberTipline - a global reporting mechanism - have reached historic highs, exceeding 36 million reports in 2023. These figures reflect both increased prevalence and improved detection and reporting by online platforms.

Forms of Exploitation Linked to Gaming

- **Sex trafficking** (online grooming leading to offline exploitation or live-streamed abuse)
- **Labor trafficking** (false job offers tied to gaming, e-sports, or "content creation")
- **Financial exploitation**
- **Sexual exploitation of children** (CSEA facilitated via gaming chats and communities)

Common Modus Operandi in the Online Gaming World

Research indicates that some offenders exploit online gaming environments to initiate grooming and, in some cases, facilitate trafficking-related exploitation. Common tactics include: (Rüdiger, 2013).

- **Initial Contact and Grooming** - Offenders initiate contact through in-game chats or multiplayer interactions, using shared gameplay to build rapport and trust over time.
- **Incentivization and Control** - Virtual currency, in-game items, subscriptions, or promises of rewards may be used to encourage compliance, dependency, or secrecy.
- **Anonymity and Identity Manipulation** - Offenders frequently misrepresent their age or identity and adapt their persona to appear relatable or trustworthy to the victim.
- **Escalation and Platform Migration** - Conversations often shift from public game chats to private or encrypted platforms, reducing oversight and increasing isolation.
- **Sexualization and Exploitation** - Interaction may gradually become sexualized, leading to requests for explicit images, live-streamed abuse, or coerced content production.
- **Coercion, Blackmail, and Sextortion** - Previously obtained material—including digitally altered or AI-generated content—may be used to threaten, extort, or maintain control.
- **Transition to Offline or Ongoing Exploitation** - In some cases, grooming escalates to offline meetings, forced commercial sexual exploitation, or other trafficking-related abuses.



Online sexual offenders and human traffickers are not the same, even if an individual may engage in both forms of abuse. While grooming is a serious form of harm in itself, not all grooming results in trafficking; trafficking involves sustained exploitation, control, and a profit motive.

Learn more at:

www.antitraffickingresponse.org

Online Games in Trafficking

- Internet-Connected Gaming and Platforms
- VR and AR realities
- Metaverse (3d Online World)
- E-sports

Why Online Gaming Is a Risk Environment

Key platform characteristics traffickers may exploit:

- Real-time voice/text chat
- Anonymity and pseudonymous identities
- Global reach and cross-border interactions
- Long play sessions and private messaging
- In-game economies and virtual currencies

Risk Factors

Immersive Intensity

Highly immersive and lifelike interactions can make it easier for offenders to build rapport and trust with children. In immersive environments, including VR/AR, the sense of presence may intensify the emotional impact of harmful interactions when abuse occurs.

Anonymity and Ease of Interaction

Many gaming platforms enable anonymous or pseudonymous interaction with strangers. Competitive or collaborative gameplay can increase contact between children and adults, expanding opportunities for inappropriate engagement.

Multiple Communication Channels

Games often support simultaneous communication through voice, text, gestures, and avatars. The use of multiple interaction modes can complicate moderation and make harmful behavior harder to detect.

Enclosed or Private Consumption

Gaming content is frequently accessed through personal devices or headsets, limiting visibility to parents or caregivers and reducing opportunities for informal supervision.

Financial Incentives and In-Game Economies

In-game currencies, digital items, and rewards can be used to exert influence or pressure. Offenders may exploit these systems by offering virtual incentives to encourage risky or exploitative behavior.

Limited Age Assurance Mechanisms

Many platforms rely on self-reported age or lack robust age-assurance mechanisms, allowing children to access spaces intended for older users and increasing exposure to potential harm.

