

CONTROLLING CHILD GROOMING IN THE DIGITAL WORLD: PUBLIC POLICY STRATEGIES BASED ON MEDIA CRIMINOLOGY STUDIES

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Abstract:

Child grooming in the digital realm, particularly through online gaming platforms, has evolved into a complex and systematic form of cybercrime. This study aims to examine the phenomenon of child grooming in the online gaming world from a media criminology perspective, focusing on predatory communication patterns, the dynamics of psychological manipulation of children, and systemic weaknesses in digital child protection regulations in Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were obtained through literature studies, analysis of reports from institutions such as UNICEF, ECPAT, and the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), and articles from national online media. The findings indicate that groomers utilize interactive game features such as voice chat, text chat, and virtual gifts to create emotional closeness, build trust, and ultimately exploit children. Legal loopholes are found in the absence of explicit articles related to the pre-exploitation (grooming) stage in the Child Protection Law and the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law. Furthermore, content moderation on digital platforms is not yet responsive to the manipulative interactions that precede sexual crimes. Within the media criminology framework, child grooming is understood as a crime amplified by technological infrastructure, social algorithms, and regulatory failures. This study recommends amending laws, strengthening AI-based moderation, curriculum-based digital literacy, and cross-border cooperation as strategic steps to stem the escalation of sexual crimes against children in cyberspace.

Keywords: Child Grooming, Online Games, Media Criminology, Child Protection, Digital Policy, Online Predators

INTRODUCTION

With the acceleration of digitalization, social media and online games have become an integral part of the lives of children and adolescents. However, the digital space, once considered a means of entertainment, has now also become fertile ground for child grooming crimes. "Online games provide social spaces where players develop friendships, romantic relationships, and even social capital." In the increasingly evolving digital landscape, online games are no longer merely a means of entertainment but have transformed into social spaces where players build friendships, forge emotional connections, and even establish real social capital. Behind the virtual characters and dynamic virtual worlds, interactions that resemble real-world social life are growing, making online games the new face of social media for the digital generation (Whitty & Young, 2011). According to Craven, Brown, and Gilchrist (2006), child grooming is a deliberate, manipulative process in which perpetrators build emotional closeness with children for sexual exploitation.

In the context of online gaming, this process occurs gradually through interactive features like voice chat or private messages. Perpetrators often pose as peers to gain the victim's trust, then steer the interaction toward sexual activity (Winters & Jeglic, 2016). Online gaming, in this context, is no



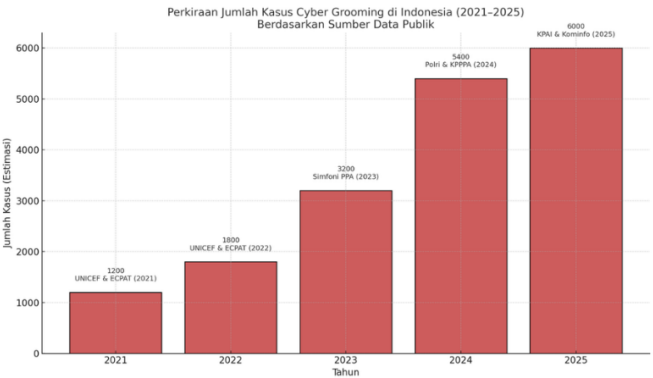
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longer simply a recreational medium but also a potential platform for digital predators – a threat that is still not fully understood by the public or policymakers.

UNICEF Indonesia's 2025 report shows that 88.9 percent of children in Indonesia are connected to the internet, but only around 37.5 percent of them have received adequate education about digital safety. It indicates a significant gap between children's access and preparedness to face risks in the digital world. Globally, ECPAT, in collaboration with Western Sydney University, reported an 82 percent spike in child grooming cases following the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating increased vulnerability of children online.

The situation in Indonesia also shows a similar trend. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) revealed in 2023 that more than 197,000 children were involved in online gambling activities, most of which began through online games. The same report stated that games that allow interaction through chat features and in-app purchases (microtransactions) are often exploited by perpetrators for grooming. One common method involves offering gifts in the form of diamonds or game items in exchange for requests to send personal or sexual photos. In one case, perpetrators used the FreeFire app to promise gifts to children, then blackmailed them after obtaining the requested photos.

Several cases that have emerged in Jakarta, Bandung, and Makassar illustrate a recurring pattern in which perpetrators utilize in-game elements such as avatars, voice chat, and in-game communities to build emotional bonds with victims. In late 2024, an incident occurred in which an adult male offered diamonds to children aged 9 to 17, asked them to send personal photos, and then blackmailed them through the in-game chat feature. Cases like these demonstrate that grooming often occurs without parental knowledge or oversight from the gaming platform itself.



Source: UNICEF, ECPAT, Simfoni PPA, Polri, KPPPA, KPAI & Kominfo

Figure 1. Estimated Number of Cyber Grooming Cases in Indonesia (2021-2025)

Statistical data shows a significant upward trend in cyber grooming cases in Indonesia from 2021 to 2025. Based on reports from UNICEF, ECPAT, and government agencies such as Simfoni PPA, the Indonesian National Police, and the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), the estimated number of cases increased from 1,200 in 2021 to around 6,000 in 2025. This increase reflects weak supervision of digital spaces and low literacy on child protection in the online realm.

From a media criminology perspective, crimes like child grooming cannot be considered incidental. Online games provide an open, largely anonymous communication space, without adequate age verification systems and without effective oversight mechanisms. It creates a digital ecosystem that supports the growth of predatory behavior. Unfortunately, legal policies in Indonesia, such as the Child Protection Law and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law,



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still do not specifically target digital grooming practices in the context of online games. Policy responses tend to be reactive, while the grooming process is progressive and structured.

The Indonesian government, through cross-ministerial collaboration including the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, is currently drafting a Presidential Regulation (Perpres) on child protection in the digital world, including from risks in online games. Other efforts, such as Permenkominfo No. 2 of 2024 concerning age classification in games and PP TUNAS (PP No. 17 of 2025) concerning the game rating system through the IGRS scheme, have begun to be implemented. However, these regulations are still limited to content aspects, and age classification does not explicitly prevent grooming processes carried out through in-game communication features.

Academic studies in Indonesia have so far focused primarily on the dangers of sexual exploitation on social media and exposure to violent content, while in-depth studies on grooming practices in online games are still limited. Similarly, approaches based on media criminology theory, which examine how digital technology can facilitate crime, have not been widely integrated into the design of child protection policies in cyberspace.

One real-life narrative emerging from online community platforms like Reddit illustrates how groomers operate in the digital space. One user described how the perpetrator contacted children through a female character in a game, then engaged them in conversation, then moved to a voice chat app, and finally took the communication to a private messaging platform like WhatsApp, leading to a physical meeting. Stories like these demonstrate that digital grooming practices are not only real but also constantly evolving with technological changes.

Based on the reality of the increasing practice of child grooming in online games, this study aims to examine this phenomenon comprehensively through a media criminology perspective, analyze weaknesses in child protection policies in Indonesia's digital space, and formulate preventive and adaptive policy strategies to face the challenges of sexual crimes in the digital era.

It is hoped that the results of this study will not only provide theoretical contributions to the development of digital criminology discourse but also provide more concrete and operational policy directions for decision-makers, digital platform developers, and the wider community in creating a safe and child-friendly digital environment in the era of ever-evolving technology.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using a media criminology framework as the primary analytical tool. The goal is to comprehensively investigate child grooming practices within the online gaming ecosystem and examine gaps in child protection policies in Indonesia's digital realm. Given that this issue is still relatively new and complex, an exploratory approach was chosen to enable researchers to understand the context, social dynamics, and interactions between perpetrators and victims within the virtual space.

The data used in this study are secondary data, obtained through a review of various literature and official documents. Data sources include reports from national and international institutions such as UNICEF, ECPAT, KPAI, Kominfo, Polri, and Simfoni PPA, as well as laws and regulations such as the Child Protection Law, the ITE Law, Permenkominfo No. 2 of 2024, and PP No. 17 of 2025 (PP TUNAS). Furthermore, data was also obtained from news articles published by leading online media outlets (Kompas, Tempo, Detik) and digital community platforms such as Reddit, which often serve as a platform for testimonials and real-life experiences from users regarding grooming practices in online games.



Data collection was conducted through literature and documentation studies, involving the identification, selection, and review of relevant sources. The analytical technique used was content analysis, in which each piece of information collected was examined to identify predatory communication patterns, grooming tactics used, and available policy responses. The analysis results were grouped into several central themes, such as the characteristics of child grooming in online games, weaknesses in digital platform monitoring systems, and regulatory gaps in protecting children from technology-based sexual violence.

This analysis process is framed within the perspective of media criminology, which views digital crimes such as grooming as arising not only from the personal motives of the perpetrators, but also from a combination of technological developments, minimal regulation, and weak social oversight in cyberspace.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, source triangulation was conducted, comparing data from various sources, such as official reports, scientific journals, news media, and user narratives in online communities. Furthermore, the researchers employed a reflective-critical approach in reading the data to reduce the possibility of bias in interpreting the information. The scope of this study is limited, primarily by the absence of direct interviews with both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, the analysis focuses more on structural and regulatory aspects, rather than on individual psychological dimensions. The research is also limited to the Indonesian context, with the objects of study covering popular online gaming platforms such as Free Fire, Mobile Legends, and Roblox, which are known for their high level of interactivity and the potential for exploitation by groomers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Child Grooming Practices in Online Games. Based on an analysis of UNICEF reports (2023), ECPAT Indonesia (2024), and Simfoni PPA data (2022–2024), child grooming in the digital realm, particularly online games, exhibits a systematic and multi-layered communication pattern. The perpetrators' *modus operandi* tends to utilize public and private chat features within games to approach children. Perpetrators pose as peers or saviors who understand the child's feelings. The grooming process occurs in stages: establishing trust, separating the victim from their social environment, offering virtual gifts (such as diamonds or skins), and then engaging in online sexual exploitation or inviting them to meet in person.

According to Craven et al. (2006), digital grooming follows the "approach, build trust, isolate, sexualize" pattern. This finding aligns with the 2024 Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) report, which stated that 76% of child sexual abuse cases involving digital media began with grooming on social media or online games. In the Indonesian context, platforms like Free Fire, Roblox, and Mobile Legends provide intensive communication spaces without strict age verification, allowing predators to reach underage victims easily.

An Empirical Study of the Media: 4 Cases of Child Grooming in Online Games.

Table 1. Based on Grooming Mode

Mode	Game / Case	Description
Gradual emotional manipulation	Free Fire (Tempo, 2024)	The perpetrator built a relationship for 2 months before asking for nude photos.
Platform migration	Roblox → Discord (Kompas, 2023)	The perpetrator moved the victim to Discord to avoid Roblox moderation.
Barter virtual gifts	Mobile Legends (Detik, 2023)	Skin is used as a medium of exchange for sexual acts in video calls.



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Identity disguise and recording	Hago → Telegram (Kumparan, 2022)	The perpetrator disguised himself and recorded sexual conversations and then sold the recorded content.
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Table 2. Based on Game Platform Type

Platform Type	Game / Case	Vulnerable Features
Competitive gaming + voice chat	Free Fire, Mobile Legends	Voice chat, virtual gifts (skins).
Educational and social games	Roblox	Private chat, wide child access.
Social games & karaoke	Hago	Free voice chat, anonymous identity.

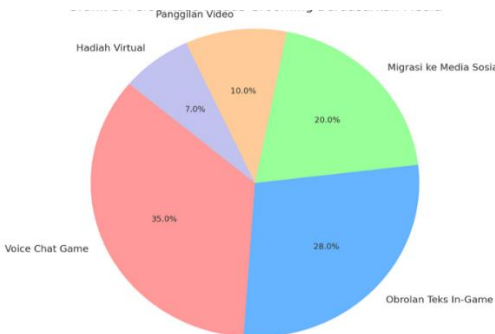
Table 3. Based on the Age of the Victim and Perpetrator

Case	Age of the Victim	Age of the perpetrator	Power Relations
Free Fire	13 years old (female)	24 years old	The perpetrator is older, taking advantage of emotional relationships.
Roblox	12 years old (boy)	Not stated (adult)	Victims are lured across platforms, technically inferior.
Mobile Legends	Teenager (not named)	Presumed adult	The perpetrators exploited through the lure of skins.
Hago	Not mentioned (child)	35 years	The perpetrator disguised himself, using a fake voice and name.

Table 4. Based on Regulatory Gaps

Regulatory Loopholes	Case	Information
There is no specific offense for the initial grooming process.	Free Fire	The law only punishes the consequences, not the initial manipulative relationship.
No cross-platform settings	Roblox → Discord	There is no legal basis for digital migration tactics in grooming.
Virtual gifts are not yet regulated as a tool of crime.	Mobile Legends	Digital skins & items can be bait but are not yet regulated by law.
Lack of integration between platforms & Kominfo	Hago → Telegram	Weak child reporting & content moderation across foreign platforms.

Data Visualization: Risks, Responses, and Regulatory Gaps.



Source: UNICEF, ECPAT International, Simfoni PPA

Figure 1. Percentage of Grooming Modes by Media

Child grooming in online games is a strategy employed by perpetrators to gain the trust of child victims for sexual exploitation gradually. Based on data compiled by UNICEF (2023), ECPAT



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International (2024), and Simfoni PPA (2022–2024), perpetrators are known to utilize digital communication features in games as a means of approach. Graph 1 details the percentage of media used in the digital grooming process as follows:

Table 5. Details the Percentage of Media Use in the Digital Grooming Process

Grooming Mode	Percentage (%)
Voice Chat Game	35%
Teks Chat In-Game	28%
Migration to Social Media	20%
Video Call	10%
Hadiah Virtual	7%

In-game voice chat is the medium most frequently used by players (35%). Voice communication is considered effective in building emotional closeness because it creates a more intense, personal feel. Turkle explained that voice-based interactions create a deep sense of intimacy in the digital space, making it easier for children to feel comfortable and trusting, even if they have never met in person.

In-game text chat features, which account for 28% of the total, are also a gateway for perpetrators to initiate interactions. Games like Roblox, Free Fire, and Mobile Legends offer both public and private chat rooms, but without adequate age validation. According to a report by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), 67% of cases of digital sexual exploitation of children begin with text conversations that escalate into manipulative relationships.

Migration to social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Discord was recorded in 20% of the cases. This strategy demonstrates how perpetrators switch platforms to increase control over victims while avoiding stricter in-game moderation systems. Livingstone and Haddon's findings suggest that cross-platform migration is a common tactic in digital grooming practices, as social media offers higher levels of privacy and less oversight.

Video calls, even if they only account for 10% of the time, are often the next or final stage of the grooming process, where victims are encouraged to perform sexual acts live on camera. The ECPAT report states that these interactions are often secretly recorded and used as a means of blackmail (sextortion), further strengthening the perpetrator's psychological control over the victim.

Virtual gifts such as diamonds, exclusive skins, or premium in-game items were used in 7% of cases. Perpetrators use these rewards as a tool for emotional manipulation, creating an exploitative reciprocal relationship. Craven et al. call this tactic a form of "reward conditioning," where perpetrators create a child's dependence on rewards as a means of control.

This overview confirms that child grooming in online gaming occurs through various stages and mutually supportive communication channels. While voice chat and text are the dominant channels, platform migration and reward-based strategies demonstrate that perpetrators are highly adaptable to digital features. Unfortunately, many gaming platforms still lack predatory behavior detection systems or reporting tools that are easily accessible to children.

To understand the extent to which national regulations are able to protect children from child grooming practices in the digital realm, a comparative analysis of five key regulations was conducted. An effectiveness score was assigned based on the suitability of the legal substance to the dynamics of digital crime, particularly those related to manipulation, sexual exploitation, and



technology-based interactions. This assessment was based on a literature review of the ECPAT (2024) report, the PPA Symphony, and policy evaluations by cyber law and child protection experts.

Table 6. Regulatory Effectiveness Score

No	Name of Regulation	Effectiveness Score (100 Scale)	Information
1	UU Child Protection (UU No. 35/2014)	65	Focuses on physical sexual exploitation; does not specifically address digital grooming.
2	UU ITE (UU No. 19/2016)	60	Trapping perpetrators through content, but not including interactive manipulation stages.
3	UU Pornography (UU No. 44/2008)	62	Only reaches if there is explicit content; it does not touch the pre-exploitation stage.
4	PP TUNAS 2025 (PP No. 17/2025)	55	Focused on the digital children's ecosystem but not yet operational at the technical level.
5	Permenkominfo No.2/2024	50	Providing age classification and content labeling, it does not yet cover interaction monitoring.

The Child Protection Law (Law No. 35 of 2014) received a score of 65/100. This law is a key pillar of child protection in Indonesia, particularly regarding sexual exploitation and violence. However, its weakness lies in the absence of regulations regarding the initial stages of digital grooming, such as manipulative communication, disguising the perpetrator's identity, and social segregation tactics against the victim. The focus remains on physical or explicit acts, rather than the psychological processes that precede them.

The ITE Law (Law No. 19 of 2016) received a score of 60/100. This regulation actually has the power to regulate the distribution of harmful content or harmful electronic communications. However, the ITE Law remains too content-centric, only targeting perpetrators when child pornography, digital blackmail, or media-based threats have already been distributed. This subtle and gradual grooming process often escapes the law's grasp.

The Pornography Law (Law No. 44 of 2008) was given a score of 62/100, as its primary focus is on the creation, distribution, and consumption of pornographic material. This law can be invoked when a perpetrator stores or distributes images or videos of a victim. However, the emotional exploitation process that occurs before the content appears is not addressed in this regulation, making it insufficiently responsive to psychological manipulation-based grooming practices.

Meanwhile, Government Regulation No. 17 of 2025 (PP TUNAS 2025), a new government initiative to build a safe digital ecosystem for children, only received a score of 55/100. Despite its progressive vision of establishing a safe digital space for children, this PP is still not technically operational and does not provide concrete instruments for law enforcement across digital platforms. The lack of harmonization between institutions and the lack of mandatory provisions for foreign platforms limit the reach of this regulation.

Finally, Minister of Communication and Information Technology Regulation No. 2 of 2024 received the lowest score, at 50/100. This regulation places greater emphasis on age classification and labeling of digital content. While relevant in the context of general content regulation, this



regulation fails to address the need for interaction moderation, AI detection systems for predatory behavior, or child-friendly reporting in online apps and games.

Of the five regulations, none explicitly addresses the complexity of digital grooming as a form of relationship- and communication-based crime. Therefore, legal revisions or the creation of specific legislation that regulates digital exploitation of children with a holistic approach, encompassing manipulative processes, online interactions, and cross-platform interactions, are necessary.

Therefore, awareness of grooming patterns needs to be increased among parents, educators, game developers, and policymakers. Strengthening AI-based digital moderation and digital literacy education for children must be part of preventative efforts to create a safe online environment.

Analysis of Regulatory Gaps in Handling Digital Grooming of Children in Indonesia. Law No. 35 of 2014 concerning Child Protection is the primary legal basis for protecting children from violence and exploitation, including sexual violence. Articles 81 and 82 explicitly stipulate criminal sanctions for perpetrators who commit indecent acts or sexual intercourse with minors. However, this regulation does not address the initial stage of digital-based sexual crimes, namely grooming, a manipulative and gradual process of gaining a child's trust as a prerequisite for sexual exploitation. Therefore, unless the perpetrator has yet to engage in physical acts or sexually explicit content, law enforcement officials struggle to prosecute them legally. Legally, grooming is still considered an "intent" or pre-delict behavior that has not been explicitly regulated as a separate crime.

Meanwhile, the 2016 Electronic Information and Transactions Law No. 19 and the 2008 Pornography Law No. 44 focus on digital content such as sexually explicit images, videos, and texts. While crucial for combating the spread of child exploitation material, these laws do not address the manipulative interactions that underlie the grooming process. For example, a perpetrator who emotionally seduces a victim through voice chat or text to build a relationship of trust, but has not yet conveyed explicit content or sexual requests, cannot be prosecuted under either the 2016 Electronic Information and Transactions Law or the Pornography Law. It creates a legal gap in addressing relationship-based crimes that do not yet involve visual or physical harm.

The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology Regulation No. 2 of 2024 and the National Development Planning Regulation No. 17 of 2025, the latest regulatory initiatives in the field of digital child protection, place greater emphasis on content classification and age-appropriate labeling. While these measures are crucial for limiting children's access to inappropriate material, they have not addressed the interactive aspects of communication within online games or social media. To date, there are no national standards requiring platforms to actively moderate voice and text chats, implement AI-based detection, or provide easily accessible reporting mechanisms for children. As a result, many cases of grooming in digital communication spaces occur without systemic intervention from service providers.

This situation demonstrates a significant legal vacuum. Digital predators exploit this gray area by switching platforms, using fake identities, and utilizing unmoderated communication features to reach children. Research by Livingstone et al. (2021) also confirms that regulations that do not specifically address grooming processes will often delay law enforcement, as they can only act once the crime has already occurred. It contradicts the principle of prevention-based child protection mandated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ratified by Indonesia through Law No. 10 of 2012.

Given these conditions, concrete steps are needed in digital law reform. One such measure is amending the Child Protection Act to include an article criminalizing digital grooming, as has been done in the UK through the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which regulates "meeting a child following sexual grooming." Furthermore, technical regulations need to be drafted to require digital service



3. Training for law enforcement officers is crucial to improve their understanding of the dynamics and patterns of child grooming, particularly in the digital realm. This training should include the ability to detect early signs of grooming and the use of technology to identify and intervene preventatively.
4. Digital literacy in schools must be strengthened by integrating digital security and online communication ethics into the formal curriculum. This way, students can understand the risks inherent in the digital space and develop the skills to protect themselves from potential threats such as grooming.
5. International collaboration is crucial, given that grooming crimes often involve cross-platform and cross-jurisdictional actors. Indonesia needs to establish bilateral and multilateral cooperation through memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with other countries to strengthen data exchange, track perpetrators, and synchronize child protection policies globally.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that child grooming in online gaming platforms is a progressive and structured form of digital-based sexual crime. Perpetrators utilize interactive communication features such as voice chat, text chat, and virtual gifts to build emotional relationships and trust with child victims, who are then manipulated into sexual exploitation. Findings from four national media case studies confirm that grooming patterns in gaming involve migration across digital platforms, escalating sexualized communications, and blackmail or sextortion strategies.

From a regulatory perspective, an analysis of existing laws and regulations, including Law No. 35 of 2014 concerning Child Protection, the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, and the Pornography Law, reveals significant gaps in responding to the phenomenon of digital grooming, particularly at the pre-exploitation stage. Current legal provisions still predominantly focus on actions that have had direct consequences (such as the distribution of content or indecent acts), rather than on the patterns of psychosocial manipulation that precede them. Furthermore, sectoral regulations such as Ministerial Regulation No. 2 of 2024 and Government Regulation No. 17 of 2025 (PP TUNAS) have not yet established binding technical standards for digital platforms regarding moderation of child interactions and case reporting.

From a media criminology perspective, child grooming is understood as a form of crime facilitated by digital communication infrastructure, interactive social algorithms, and a lack of adequate oversight. Therefore, a preventative, holistic, and adaptive policy approach to technological dynamics is needed. The state needs to reform legislation that explicitly criminalizes digital grooming, along with technical obligations for platforms to develop child protection systems based on artificial intelligence and real-time reporting. Furthermore, improving digital literacy and providing specialized training for law enforcement officers are key to addressing the complexity of sexual crimes against children in the virtual realm.

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