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Adolescent gambling-like experiences: Are they a cause for concern?

Early research in the area of adolescent gambling (summarised in Griffiths, 1995) argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, very few children had the money to gamble and as such many children's games that involved gambling-like experiences were played for "fun" not money. However, Griffiths argued that children soon learn that money (or something of material value) is a good way of keeping score. By taking risks, reputations are built and winners gain social rewards (as opposed to financial ones). Two such games that have been argued to be gambling-like precursors are marbles and card flipping (where children compete to win themed cards such as football players, *Pokemon* characters, *High School Musical* characters, etc.). In both of these games, the aim is to win an opponent's marbles or cards. These games bear marked similarities to adult gambling and fall into

the bracket of competitive games.

Internet gambling without money

The line between games and gambling are becoming ever more blurred particularly as technology converges and use of these new media become the domain of tweenagers and teenagers becoming screenagers. Over the last decade, there have been a number of articles published in *Education and Health* examining gambling-like experiences engaged in by adolescents including instant win games in children's snacks like crisps and chocolate (Griffiths, 1997) and the playing of 'free play', 'practice' and 'demo' games on Internet gambling sites (Griffiths & Wood, 2007). For instance, in a national survey of 8,017 British adolescents (aged between 12 and 15 years of age), Griffiths and Wood (2007) reported

that 8% admitted to gambling online and that nearly three in ten adolescents who had gambled online reported playing the free 'demo' games (29%). Research has shown that 'demo' and 'free play' games typically contain misleading inflated payout rates that may create or reinforce misconceptions about gambling and the belief that the player can make a profit from gambling long term (Sevigny, Cloutier, Pelletier & Ladouceur, 2005) The Griffiths and Wood (2007) study showed that teenagers were engaged in both non-monetary forms of gambling and gambling online with their own money and/or gambling along with their parents. Furthermore, children gambling within the family setting may breed familiarity and acceptability of the activity. Research has demonstrated that parents' positive attitudes towards gambling may be transmitted to their children's subsequent gambling behaviour (Wood & Griffiths, 2004).

Interactive television gaming using premium rate telephone lines

In addition to gambling and gaming, there are new hybrid forms of entertainment and commercial activity featuring gambling-like experiences being introduced. These hybrid forms of entertainment - such as interactive television (i-TV) gaming (Griffiths, 2004) and online penny auctions (see next section) - are likely have implications for children and adolescents.

Over the last few years there has been a significant increase in the number of television shows raising revenue through the use of interactive programming in which viewers call into the show using a premium rate telephone service to either answer simple quiz questions or vote somebody out of a reality TV show like *Big Brother* or *Strictly Come Dancing*. In fact, i-TV services are increasingly being linked to actual television programmes.

This innovative new form of interactive viewing experience raises many questions

about whether viewers (including many children and adolescents) are being exploited or whether such programming is just another enjoyment-enhancing dimension to the viewing experience. The similarities of interactive television quizzes to gambling experiences have not gone unnoticed by those in the gambling studies field (see Griffiths, 2004; 2006; 2007).

Interactive television quiz shows share many of the dimensions of interactive television gambling, and also raises the same types of concern when talking about vulnerable and susceptible populations such as children.

At a very simple level it could be argued that in many interactive television quizzes, viewers are participating in a lottery. For instance, viewers are typically asked to call a premium rate telephone line and asked to answer a very simple question. A winner is then chosen from all those viewers getting the correct answers. This, to all intents and purposes, is a lottery. What is worse is that viewers do not even know what the probability of winning is. It could also be argued that the viewer is staking money (i.e., the cost of the premium rate telephone call) on the outcome of a future event (i.e., whether they predict the correct answer). This again could be defined as a form of gambling.

Like Internet gambling, i-TV quiz shows appear to be introduced with little concern for the social implications that may affect a small percentage of the population. Bringing such activities to a television set in the home carries with it a special social responsibility. For instance, there are issues about protecting vulnerable populations (e.g., adolescents, problem gamblers, the intoxicated, etc.) and potentially exploitative marketing practices. In fact, no-one participating has any idea what the odds are of winning. To what extent i-TV gaming is affecting the youth population is as yet undetermined, but anyone with access to a phone can participate.

Online penny auction sites

Another gambling-like activity is participation in an online penny auction such as 'Madbid', 'Swoopo', 'Bid Boogie', 'Rapid Bargain' and 'Budson' (Griffiths, 2008b). In order for a person to participate in an online penny auction, they need to place a bid in an ongoing auction. Bids can only be made in one penny increments. They can do this by (a) placing a bid by sending a text message from their mobile phone (at £1.50 a bid plus operator's costs) or (b) placing a bid through the creation of an online account where the person buys a 'bundle' of bids (at 75p to £1.40 a bid depending on how big a bundle they buy in advance). To bid by text message, a person sends a message with the code for the specific product that they want to bid on. There is no limit to how many bids that can be submitted on the same auction product. There is also no limit on how many different products can be bid on at any one time.

Here is an example of a real winning bid as this article was being written. A *PlayStation* videogame console (retail price of £310) was won in a penny auction for £8.34. To the winner of the auction, this was won at a hugely discounted price. However, what this really means is that there were 834 separate bids for this item all costing between 75p and £1.50 per bid (depending whether it was done online or via mobile phone). Looking at the 'bid history', most of the final 50 bids were made by just two individuals who at a minimum spent at least £30 in those final bids trying to secure the item.

Although one person won the console, the other person spent a lot of money and got nothing. Griffiths (2008b) has argued that this is Internet gambling under another name. Anyone with a mobile phone (e.g., the vast majority of teenagers) can participate in such an activity and it could be argued that many of the items in the auctions appeal particularly to teenage

audiences (video game consoles, MP3 players, laptops, etc.). As with i-TV gaming, to what extent this very new activity with gambling-like experiences is affecting the youth population is as yet undetermined but that does not mean it should not be discussed as a potential issue of concern.

Social networking and gambling

The social networking phenomenon has spread rapidly in the UK. The Office of Communications (2008) found that almost half of child Internet users (49%) aged 8 to 17 years have set up their own profile on social networking sites (e.g., *My Space*, *Bebo*, *Facebook*, *Sagazone*, *Blubelt*, *Habbo Hotel*, *Club Penguin*). Despite the fact that the minimum age for most major social networking sites is usually 13 years (and 14 years on MySpace), Ofcom also reported that just over a quarter of 8 to 11 year olds who are aware of social networking sites (27%) said that they had a profile on a social networking site.

The most popular social networking site used by children was *Bebo* (63%). Downs (2008) noted that content-generated risks from this new leisure activity have not been investigated in any detail, yet young people using these sites are able to gain access to gambling. Professor Susan Greenfield goes even further and asserts that children's minds are being rewired by overuse of social networking sites, leading to shortened attention spans, and a preference for flashy digital media over traditional book learning (Derbyshire, 2009).

Downs claims that the potential of social networking sites to normalise gambling behaviours as part of the consumption patterns of a non-gambling leisure activity may change social understandings of the role of gambling amongst young people. For example, while socially responsible gambling emphasises that money spent on a gamble may not offer a return other than the pleasure gained from the game the social networking utilities can present gambling as

a viable route for the acquisition of scarce virtual goods. According to Downs' pilot research, there were 25 Poker applications on *Bebo* (and over 500 separate poker groups) and over 100 poker applications on *Facebook* (and over 1000 separate poker groups). These poker sites featured some with real prizes, some with cash-play options and all easily downloadable by those under 18 years along with many free trial games. The largest of these poker groups had over several thousand members and in one group that Downs surveyed, 15% of those in the group declared they were under the age of 18 years. Furthermore, gambling applications typically contain sidebar adverts and hyperlinks to real gambling sites.

Downs also reported a type of pseudo-gambling among '*Fluff Friends*' that has over 100,000 active users per month. In this social networking forum, users (typically young girls) create '*Fluff*' Art. To do this they have to earn 'munny' (sic) - a type of virtual money through pet racing. Pet racing costs 1-point per race and winnings can be up to 4000 points. Clearly there is no money changing hands but young children are learning the mechanics of gambling and Downs asserts there are serious questions about whether gambling with virtual money encourages positive attitudes towards gambling in young people. For instance, does gambling with virtual money lead to an increased prevalence of actual gambling? She also asks to what extent are gambling-related groups on social networking sites being used by those under 18 years and whether membership of such a groups facilitates access to commercial gambling sites?

Conclusions

This article has briefly highlighted the

new types of gambling-like experiences that children and adolescents are now being exposed to. More research is needed in all of these areas and parents and practitioners need educating as to the new ways in which the line between non-financial forms of gaming and gambling are beginning to blur.

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