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Simulated gambling in video gaming: What are the implications for adolescents?

Recent empirical research suggests that children and adolescents access online gambling activities using digital devices such as personal computers, laptops, smartphones, and other portable devices (e.g., Griffiths & Parke, 2010; King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010). Three national adolescent gambling surveys carried out for the National Lottery Commission in Great Britain (Griffiths & Wood, 2007; Ipsos MORI, 2009; 2011) have all shown that a small minority of children and adolescents can and do gamble online. The most recent study (Ipsos MORI, 2011) reported that 2% of 11-16 year olds had played online lottery games and 2% had gambled on other online games (i.e., online casinos, online poker, online bingo and/or online sports betting). These data suggest that the first gambling experiences by some children and adolescents might occur via the Internet, mobile phones, and/or interactive television rather than in a traditional offline gaming venue such as a casino, amusement arcade or bookmakers (Griffiths, 2011).

Gambling simulation

As gambling on the Internet has expanded, a wide range of 'gambling-like' activities has emerged on smartphones, social networking sites, and within video games (Griffiths, King, & Delfabbro, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; King, Delfabbro, Derevensky & Griffiths, 2012). There are also opportunities to gamble without spending money on both commercial gambling websites and social networking sites. These 'free play' simulations of gambling activities provide opportunities for young people to practice or become more familiar with gambling activities without spending real money (Griffiths, King, & Delfabbro, 2009). Despite the proliferation of non-monetary gambling simulations, there has been little research or policy attention on them

(Griffiths, 2010). Simulated gambling activities and gambling themes also feature in many modern video games. King, et al (2012) note that video games that feature gambling may be categorised according to the following three categories:

- **Standard gambling simulation:** A digitally simulated interactive gambling activity that is structurally identical to the standard format of an established gambling activity, such as blackjack or roulette. For instance, *Texas Hold 'em* (TikGames) is a standard gambling simulation of the poker variant of the same name. Poker is played using virtual credits against a computer opponent or in competition with other online players. Playing poker represents the entirety of the gaming experience in this video game. In contrast, the video game *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar) features a casino situated within the virtual game world that allows players to gamble using in-game credit with or against other players in social competitions. However, the gambling content within this type of video game represents only a small part of the overall gaming experience.
- **Non-standard gambling simulation:** An interactive gambling activity that involves the intentional wagering of in-game credits or other items on an uncertain outcome, in an activity that may be partially modelled on a standard gambling activity but which contains distinct player rules or other structural components that differ from established gambling games. For instance, the video game *Fable II Pub Games* contains three unique casino-style games, partly modelled on craps (dice), roulette, and slot machines. Players can wager 'gold coins' on

chance-determined outcomes (i.e., patterns in cards, dice throws, spinning wheels, etc.) in order to win greater amounts of gold, as well as other items and prizes.

- *Gambling references:* The appearance of non-interactive gambling material or gambling-related paraphernalia/materials within the context of the video game.

Online video games

Online video games may also feature opportunities to gamble. For example, online games such as *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft* include player-operated gambling activities using the in-game currency. These activities are usually supported through websites adjunctive to the video game (i.e., wagers are placed outside the game), but the gambling activity (i.e., winning and losing) takes place in the game world. Gambling activities include sports betting (e.g., placing bets on the outcome of player duels and battles) and lotteries (e.g., selling raffle tickets for a chance at winning a prize). The relative scarcity of in-game assets, including currency and items, makes them valuable to the game's community of players. Some players will exchange real money for in-game currency as way of advancing more quickly in the game. The option to exchange in-game currency and other content (virtual goods) to other players for real world money thus gives these activities a limited, albeit indirect, financial element (Castronova, 2005).

Modern video games provide realistic and sophisticated simulated gambling opportunities to youth. According to our recent analysis (King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths, 2010), the potential risks of young people engaging in simulated gambling include:

- Greater familiarity with gambling and acceptance of gambling as a 'normal' entertainment activity;
- The development of gambling strategies and the ability to practice these strategies without need of money;
- The development of positive gambling beliefs and thoughts of 'winning big' associated with gambling;
- Exposure to the excitement of gambling

wins, including bonuses and jackpots;

- False expectations about how gambling operates and an inflated sense of its long-term profitability.

Simulated gambling has the potential to offer positive experiences associated with gambling without the typical barriers to entry associated with gambling (e.g., money, age restriction). Although no actual money is involved in simulated gambling, it is recognised that people (including youths) are not only motivated to gamble for financial reasons. Gambling can provides excitement, relief from boredom, a way of coping with problems, and a means of social interaction (i.e., playing with friends). Very simply, gambling is engaged in not only for financial rewards, but for physiological, psychological, and/or social rewards (Griffiths, 1999). Simulated gambling activities may also enable young people to feel more comfortable with gambling *per se*, which may assist the transition from simulated gambling to gambling with real money.

A risk associated with video games that feature simulated gambling is that activities may often combine the skill and fast-paced action of a video game with the chance-based nature of gambling. This combination of skill and chance may set up false expectations about the governing rules and player control involved in gambling activities. For example, younger players may believe that, with sufficient practice, they can overcome and master the challenges of the game.

Serious social problem

Youth gambling represents a serious social problem (Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, et al, 2010). Therefore, it is important for researchers, health professionals, and parents to be informed about emerging media risk factors for problem gambling. Commercial video gaming technologies provide young people with unrestricted access to realistic gambling and gambling-like experiences. This article has highlighted that some commercial video games feature casino-style gambling activities that enable players to gamble using in-game credit with or against other players in social competition. Simulated gambling via popular social networking applications such as *Zynga*

Poker, DoubleDown Casino, Slotmania - and, more recently, the proposed *Casinoville* which may feature real money - also raises significant concerns about the accessibility and ubiquity of gambling as a media pastime for young people.

Simulated gambling in video games is often associated with incentives and rewards, such as virtual currency, rare in-game items, and other content of large contextual value in the game. While some video games with simulated gambling (e.g., *Red Dead Redemption*) may be intended for use by adults only, many video games (e.g., *Pokémon*) feature content that appeals mainly to a younger audience. This material could therefore be considered a form of gambling advertising targeted at youth. Furthermore, simulated gambling in video games may enhance young players' familiarity of casino and card games. Given the brief overview presented here, we would recommend that policymakers should critically consider the growing presence of gambling in online gaming and social media technologies, and associated issues of social responsibility as these activities become more monetised and/or promote or otherwise endorse involvement in monetary gambling activities.

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