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Early gambling - safe or dicey?

Loot boxes are a regular feature within video games, but are they gambling?

In their 2019 report on gaming and gambling in young people (aged 16–24), the UK charity Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust (YGAM) identified that 79% of individuals engaged in gaming and 47% in gambling.

What's a 'loot box'?

In their game a player pays money in advance for a virtual loot box, which can be either in the form of a direct payment or in-game currency. After purchase a random outcome is then revealed.

Loot boxes are often necessary to progress in a game ('pay-to-win') or are a way to obtain desirable items. The game design means players may feel under pressure to purchase a loot box to achieve an outcome or feel satisfaction within the game.

Experience of gamers

From interviews and surveys of 21 adults aged 18 to 27 we found that gamers perceived chance elements of loot boxes within online gaming are akin to gambling.

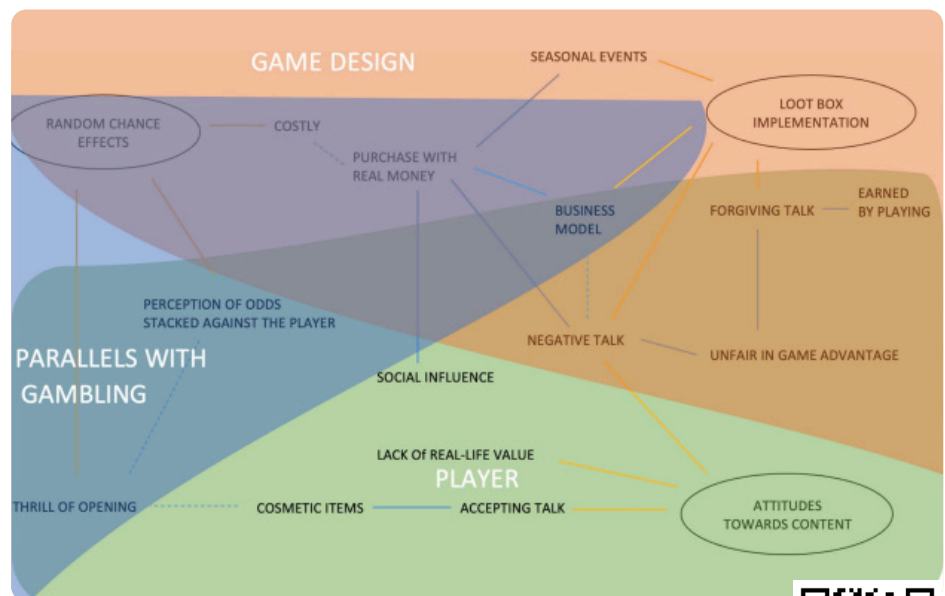
However, we found the emotional investment associated with placing a gambling bet is greater than the young people reported experiencing when they paid for a loot box.

There are parallels between gambling and loot boxes and as many children game it is important to understand the relationship between gaming and future problematic gambling.

Researchers should establish if there is a pathway that leads from gaming and loot boxes into problematic gambling, and, if needed, inform safety and prevention strategies.

Government should mandate research funders to encourage the pipeline of research into loot boxes to safeguard young people.

Parliament should consider if or how far gambling regulation should be applied to gambling elements within gaming to safeguard young people.



Hodge, S. E., Vykoukal, M., McAlaney, J., Bush-Evans, R. D., Wang, R. J., & Ali, R. (2022). What's in the box? Exploring UK players' experiences of loot boxes in games; the conceptualisation and parallels with gambling. *PLoS One*, 17(2). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0263567

