

Teens who play video games with gambling-like elements more likely to start real betting, study suggests



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Gaming habits can form a gateway to problem gambling, with teens exposed to prize wheels and loot boxes more likely to wager with real money a year later

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Young people who play video games with “gambling-like” elements – such as buying loot boxes or in-game items – are more likely to go on to gamble with real money.

That’s the suggestion of a new longitudinal study of gambling behaviour and attitudes in young people.

A team of experts from Belgian institutions KU Leuven and the University of Ghent quizzed more than 2,000 young gamers twice, with a year gap in-between. In follow-up surveys, it was shown those who engage in games with gambling-like elements were more likely to then gamble with real money than those who did not.

The research team, who publish their findings today in the peer-reviewed journal [*International Gambling Studies*](#), state the results show that adolescents need to be protected from this risk by updated regulations and information campaigns.

“Adolescents, parents, and educators could be made aware of the risks associated with gambling-like elements through information campaigns,” says lead author Eva Grosemans, a postdoctoral assistant, from the Media, Culture & Policy Lab at KU Leuven.

“This study could inform policymakers about the possible adverse effects of several gambling-like elements in and around video games, and points toward the need to protect minors against these effects. The results of this study highlight the importance of broadening the scope [of regulations] beyond loot boxes, by including a variety of gambling-like elements, such as social casino games, prize wheels, loot box openings, and gambling videos.”

Hundreds of games across all platforms – from console to mobile phones – feature elements such as virtual social casino games, spinning prize wheels and gambling-themed videos.

Previous research has shown correlations between interacting with gambling-like elements and (problematic) gambling behaviour. To date, however, little longitudinal research has examined the hypothesis in adolescents.

The expert team which also included Professor Rozane De Cock from KU Leuven, as well as Lowie Bradt and Professor Bart Soenens at the University of Ghent, put a survey – asking about video gaming, gambling-like elements and gambling – to 2,289 respondents in Belgium aged between 10 and 17 years. A year later 2,197 respondents took part in the second phase.

Of these respondents, 561 participated in both phases and comprised the final sample. Each phase lasted four months: from November 2021 to February 2022, and then from November 2022 to February 2023.

The key finding of the study – which forms part of a wider ‘Gam(e)(a)ble project’, investigating the blurring lines between video games and gambling – was that participants who, in the first phase, engaged in gambling-like elements of video games, were statistically more likely than others to engage in actual gambling a year later.

This ‘smoking gun’ which connects playing with gambling-like elements in phase one with actually gambling in phase two was revealed via “cross-lagged panel model” – a way for researchers to study how two things influence each other over time.

The researchers did not find the reverse to be true; those who participated in gambling in the first phase were *not* more likely to engage in gambling-like behaviour in the second phase, a year later.

And so, the team found that the more contact they had with gambling-like features, the greater the increase in gambling behavior.

Key to this was the teens' attitude to gambling; a positive attitude towards gambling and a subsequent intention to gamble played an important role in the long-term association.

In addition, the researchers found:

- Three in five (59.1%) interacted with gambling-like elements in both phases, while half (46.9%) gambled with real money in both.
- In the first phase, three-quarters (75%) of adolescents used loot boxes or other gambling-like elements. Boys (88.5%) were more likely to do so than girls (64.1%).
- The second phase showed that 60.3% of participants had engaged in some form of gambling over the past year. This time, there was little difference between boys and girls. This covered activities like using scratch cards, doing the lottery offline and online gambling.
- Scratch cards were the most popular form of gambling with around 37% of participants having used them (36.9% in phase one and 37.4% in phase two).

“Although effects observed in our study may appear modest, they are consistent in magnitude with those found in previous studies using cross-lagged panel analysis. Further analyses based on a reasoned action approach showed that gambling attitude and intention played a significant mediating role in the effects of gambling-like elements on changes in gambling,” adds co-author Professor Soenens.

The authors say despite the studies' strengths, such as its longitudinal perspective and cross-lagged panel model, their figures should be “interpreted with caution”, as a potential limitation of the paper is that respondents who had taken part in at least one of the proposed activities in the past year, were given a score of 1, possibly overstating engagement. “Future research could benefit from more stringent criteria for classifying engagement,” they state.

Further information

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