

Researchers find worrying link between problem gambling and video game loot boxes

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A major new study has provided the first evidence of a potentially dangerous link between problem gambling and video game loot boxes.

The research suggests problem gambling is more closely linked to loot box spending than to well-known risk factors like alcohol dependency and major drug problems.

Loot boxes are increasingly common in recent years and are available in highly popular games with around 40 million players worldwide each.

\$30 billion

Players can opt to transfer real money into the boxes in the hope of winning a useful virtual item from a randomised selection. Prizes can range from upgrades to their avatar or character, to advantageous equipment such as weapons or armour. The total revenue generated by loot boxes this year will be \$30 billion.

The research suggests that loot boxes may be acting as a "gateway" to problem gambling among gamers.

Alternatively, due to key similarities between loot boxes and other forms of gambling, they may be providing another outlet for individuals who are already problem gamblers to engage in harmful and excessive gambling-related behaviour.

The authors of the study are calling for the regulation and restriction of loot boxes. They have presented evidence from the study to the Australian Senate, who recently authorised a committee enquiry into extent to which loot boxes may be harmful to players.

Causality

Dr. Paul Cairns, from the Department of Computer Science at the University of York, said: "Due to the nature of this research it is impossible to tease apart whether we are seeing a situation in which spending on loot boxes leads to problem gambling or whether [problem gambling](#) leads to spending on loot boxes. It may, indeed be the case that both directions of causality are true.

"Further work is needed, but either way this research makes it clear that there is an urgent need to regulate loot boxes within the gaming industry."

For the study, the researchers recruited over 7,000 international participants from the online gaming community.

Controversy

Their level of gambling was assessed through a questionnaire and they were classified in categories ranging from non-problem gambler to problem

gambler. Participants were also asked about their spending on loot boxes in the last month.

Debate over the legal status of loot boxes has already caused controversy with mixed responses from governments. Belgium has ordered that they be removed from video games, but in France they were deemed not to legally constitute a form of gambling because there is no financial value to items won. Criticism has been rebuffed by the gaming industry along similar lines.

Dr. David Zendle, from York St John University, said: "The relationship between loot box spending and gambling remains serious and potentially dangerous regardless of whether loot boxes are technically considered a form of [gambling](#) or not. We strongly recommend that authorities and regulatory bodies restrict access to loot boxes."

Provided by University of York

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