



Concluding Remarks

Abstract Changing technology has accelerated the intersection between gaming and gambling products and practices, generated new products and thus created concerns about the impact of things like loot boxes or social casinos. Games which incorporate gambling-like practices (aside from generating profit) reflect the increasing normalisation of gambling within everyday life but these games also become accelerants of this trend, through the vast power and reach they have, especially among young people. Attention tends to focus on whether these practices should be defined as “gambling” or not. Whilst important, this arguably misses a range of other considerations—such as the potential exploitative or coercive nature of these products and the mechanics that underlie them. Games and gambling tend to be viewed as distinct practices but increasing intersection of products, practices and common mechanics used by both means they are increasingly viewed as intertwined, where the improbity of each will likely reflect on the other.

Keywords Gambling · Gaming · Intersection · Normalisation · Technology · Regulation · Action

The increasing intersection of gambling and gaming has taken on new prominence with the creation of controversial—and popular—products like loot boxes. Such focus has been given to this that various governments have looked specifically at this issue, the European Commission has reviewed it and at the time of writing, the British Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced a call for evidence on the impact of loot boxes. But loot boxes are not the first or only example of the growing intersection between games and gambling—they are just the most high profile. As I’ve shown throughout this book, there are touchpoints throughout history where gambling and gaming have intersected. Examples include the use of dice in early games of chess, leading to fierce debate about the legitimacy of chess within societies who take a prohibitive view of gambling; games replicating norms of gambling as a vice, as something to be avoided; games drawing inspiration from the huge popularity of horse racing and developing “celebrity endorsements” of products in which betting was an integral part. Furthermore, games and gambling are conceptually intertwined through play. For Caillois (1958), games of chance like roulette or lotteries were a key examples of game play. What separated games from gambling for these early theorists was the context in which play is conducted and the outcome and aftermath of that play. If all returns as it was, it is play. If not, then it is something else. Yet we have considerable linguistic ambiguity in how we differentiate the two. We still “play” roulette, “play” slot machines and it seems a linguistic peculiarity of English that we have different nouns for gambling and gaming.

Looking historically at how games and gambling intersect, what we can see is that current trends represent a rapid acceleration of these proximities, underpinned and driven by changing technology and the commodification of play. As both the gambling and gaming industries have developed and embraced new forms of technological infrastructure, where new ways of selling products to boost profits are devised, the touchpoints between these two industries has become ever more intertwined. The gaming industry incorporates gambling-like mechanics within its products to monetise play; the gambling industry, concerned about where the next generation of players are coming from, looks to the gaming industry for inspiration. Both rely on data about users, where information about players or gamblers becomes a vital commodity and opportunities to cross-sell between sectors, or to reinforce brand loyalty and recognition, become powerful business strategies.

But this is not all about business and economics. It is also about society and culture. In environments where gambling has proceeded from being prohibited to tolerated to promoted, especially in law, we have seen vast growth and increased visibility of gambling in everyday lives. Games have long taken inspiration from broader social and cultural processes, and as gambling becomes ever more normalised, an accelerated permeation of these features within digital games, perhaps, seems less surprising. In this respect, the “gambling turn” within games reflects our changing relationship with gambling itself.

Had we been paying attention, we may have better anticipated this. Back in 2006 Aphra Kerr wrote that technologies (including digital games) “*shape and are shaped by social processes*”. She knew that you can’t look at games in isolation and that they need to be situated in the broader social, cultural and economic context of their production—of which societal trends are a key part. As stated in Chapter 3, it’s no surprise that the game which kickstarted the social casino industry was poker. But it’s the first part of her sentence that tends to most concern us—the power of games themselves to shape social processes. Whilst the increasing intersection of gambling within games may now seem somewhat obvious, it’s the ongoing and enduring impact of this that now concerns us. And rightly so. The relationships between games and gambling industries are reciprocal and we have recounted many examples of companies using games to “cross sell” consumers into gambling products. And it’s not just about cross-sell but also borrowing inspiration from popular games and gaming features. Several “candy-crush” like slot games have been developed, even changing the pay mechanics so that you no longer win by having lines of similar symbols, but instead by having clusters of candies. At the time of writing, an industry seminar was organised to discuss whether the digital casino industry should embrace and facilitate greater notions of community and shared experience, as embedded within digital games. Industry executives are moving between the two sectors, taking expertise and knowledge from one and applying it to the other.

This may all seem like good business strategy—and it is—but gambling is not an ordinary commodity. When it comes to cross-selling, this isn’t cross-selling consumers books or films or music, it’s cross-selling products with inherent risk of harms. Gambling is a risk-based activity and for some, a health-harming product. Gambling can harm the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and society, as too many well know. I have sat in many gambling industry events where delegates

have spoken openly about wanting to replicate the “stickiness” of digital games, wanting to generate the same kind of brand recognition as John Lewis (or Macy’s), wanting to learn from organisations like Netflix on how best to use persuasive technologies to maximise profits with little recognition that they are not selling the same type of commodity. This is why it is important to pay attention to these processes.

That said, it is also important that we broaden our perspectives. We rightly want to know if features like loot boxes or social casinos are “gambling” or not—their definition as gambling would have a series of ramifications of how we then regulate and provide these products. But this, as the case study of social casinos has shown, sometimes leads us down a rabbit warren of arguments which tend not to be resolved until battled out in a court of law. Some ten years on, we seem no closer to really understanding the broader impacts of social casinos. We have, instead, moved on to the next thing and now debate whether these things represent gambling or not. Perhaps, instead, we should recognise this considerable conceptual ambiguity: an ambiguity that is amplified by the rapid development and growth of entirely new products enabled by changing technological infrastructure. Acknowledging this ambiguity would then seek to reframe our questions away from whether these practices are gambling or not, and towards assessment of the broader harms and ramifications of these products. In short, it would take a more consumer-protection focus.

Thinking about it this way suggests that we could articulate a set of conditions under which we become more or less concerned about a game or about a product, which then governs our responses to it. For me, this is about three inter-related aspects: power, influence, impact. Both digital gambling and gaming industries have asymmetric power relationships with their users: they know who you are, what you are doing and hold this data on you. How this power is then used to influence people to do things is a critical consideration. Both digital games and gambling products incorporate uncertainty as a key design factor, including algorithmic uncertainty, where the mechanics driving action and directing players are unknown to the user. This heightens concerns about potential manipulation within this process (Costikyan, 2013). And this is not a conspiracy theory—the young people I spoke to articulated clear feelings of control, of coercion, by the games they played, even if this was accompanied with a “knowing acceptance” of this being simply how the world works, that this is what game developers need to do to make

money. But the breaks with traditional notions of play are clear. No longer are you playing in a closed circle of friends, where money flows round this circle in a broadly redistributive way. Instead you are playing within an asymmetric system, where money flows from user to producer. And corporations are expert at maximising this. Everything is not always as it was when you finish playing—many games have memories, have visibility and may have both taken and given things of value to you. All these aspects can exert influence over behaviours. This is further amplified by the reach of these games. Many millions of people use them—far more than engage in traditional gambling industries. And, of course, there is the impact of all of this. We've seen examples of people getting in debt playing social casino games. Many of the young people I spoke to saw loot boxes as compulsive, drawing them into “addiction” in their words. Whilst debate abounds about gaming addiction (the WHO leading the way on this classification), there will undoubtedly be a range of harms for some people.

Digital games have come a long way since their inception and have become a hugely important industry, spawning new products, new innovations and new communities and cultures. Their reach, especially among young people, is exceptional and because of this we worry about what lessons (if any) young people are learning from games. Gambling and gambling-like features increasingly permeate some digital game play and games, and gambling and gaming industries increasingly ape each other. Arguably, this reflects the increasing normalisation of gambling within everyday life. Equally, the diversity of products on offer also represents increasing competition for players and for maintaining relevance. Game developers, by borrowing from and incorporating more gambling-like features in their products have either wittingly or unwittingly become agents for the further promotion and normalisation of gambling and its associated ideals within our societies. The permeation of these features within digital games may have been symptomatic of the changing status of gambling within western economies, but their inclusion within digital games has the potential to reinforce these values. As noted earlier, the so-called gambling instinct is socially conditioned and arguably digital games have become a mechanism for this conditioning. And their reach to the vast millions of players around the world makes them potentially powerful. The impact of this is unknown but in practical terms the controversy is unlikely to die down. As one colleague has aptly described, gambling regulation tends to go in waves moving from tighter to looser

regulations. After a substantial period of looser regulation, in Britain at least, a move towards to regulatory belt-tightening looks likely and is something that is supported by powerful action groups. Game designers and developers are likely to find themselves caught up in this cycle. The accelerated intersection between games and gambling means these industries are progressively becoming part of the same ecosystem and are increasingly likely to be treated as such. If anything, gaming corporations should recognise the reputational risks involved in this and argue less about “surprise” mechanics and think more about consumer care. If they don’t, others inevitably will. Forewarned is forearmed: now is the time for action.

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