

# RESPONSIBLE GAMING AND BEST PRACTICE: HOW CAN ACADEMICS HELP?

BY MARK GRIFFITHS AND RICHARD WOOD

The underlying objective of a socially responsible gambling code of conduct is to maximise opportunity and minimise harm. This should also adhere to the established principle of moving forward with caution. Social responsibility should adhere to ethical principles and is becoming a regulatory requirement in an increasing number of countries. Furthermore, it is expected by many customers who want to play with companies who show a high level of integrity. This is particularly relevant to online gaming where trust in the website and the operator is essential.



**R**esponsible gaming is about giving people the choice to play well designed games in a secure and supportive environment. The long-term sustainability of gaming is dependent upon effective responsible gaming initiatives that can help gaming to develop as a low impact mass market form of entertainment. Therefore, responsible gaming is not just an ethical or regulatory requirement, it is also good for business, and it should also be about making a profit. After all, it would be irresponsible to be in a position where a reasonable profit could not be made as this would inevitably impact upon the quality of the service offered.

## WORLD GAMBLING TRENDS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In a previous issue of *Casino and Gaming International*, the world gaming trends were outlined (see Griffiths, 2006). Looking at these, it can be argued that these trends are inextricably linked with the increasing emphasis on social responsibility in gambling. For instance:

*Gambling coming out of gambling environments:* One of the largest cultural shifts in the world of gambling is that gambling activities are no longer restricted to dedicated offline gambling environments such as casinos, bingo halls, betting shops and amusement arcades. Gambling can be done in retail outlets (e.g., lottery tickets) and pubs (e.g., slot machines) as well as in the home and the workplace via remote media (e.g. Internet gambling, mobile phones).

Also, gambling is evolving from an activity that was clearly defined as gambling, and often stigmatised, to an activity that is more about entertainment and less about winning money. Consequently, there is no longer such a thing as a "typical" gambler, and there is also no such thing as a "typical" game

either! Gaming is merging with television, videogames, communications, travel and shopping experiences and holiday concepts. Caution should be exercised here that the same high level of social responsibility is applied across the board. A bad reputation gained for one game, or channel, can have serious consequences for the entire reputation of the company.

*The increased use of technology in gambling activities:* Technology is continuing to provide new market opportunities not only in the shape of Internet gambling but also in the shape of more technologically advanced slot machines and video lottery terminals, interactive television gambling, and mobile phone gambling. In addition, other established gambling forms are becoming more technologically driven (e.g. bingo, keno). It is likely that some of these online remote forms of gambling provide less initial protection for vulnerable and susceptible individuals than offline gambling. The natural consequence of such a situation is that online gambling activities need more in the way of established social responsibility infrastructures.

*Gambling becoming a more individual activity:* One of the consequences of increased use of technology has been to reduce the fundamentally social nature of some forms of gambling to an activity that can be less social (e.g. slot machine gambling, video poker, Internet gambling). Those who experience problems are more likely to be those playing on their own (e.g. those playing to escape). Gambling in a social setting could potentially provide some kind of "safety net" for over-spenders, i.e., a form of gambling where the primary orientation of gambling is for social reasons with the possibility of some fun and chance to win some money (e.g. bingo). The shift from social to asocial forms of gambling suggests that operators need to be more socially responsible in getting gamblers to gamble sensibly and within acceptable limits (i.e., staying in control). People who are gambling to escape will be asocial wherever they are as they are not gambling for the social aspects anyway.

*Widespread deregulation and increased opportunities to gamble:* Gambling deregulation is now firmly entrenched worldwide. The general 'rule of thumb' is that where accessibility of gambling is increased, there is an increase not only in the number of regular gamblers but also an increase in the number of problem gamblers. However, there is evidence from around the world that if that social responsibility infrastructures are put in place before deregulation (e.g., education and prevention programmes, helplines, treatment facilities), then problem gambling can be stabilised and in some cases may even decrease.

### **DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Our research and dissemination of good social responsibility practices focuses upon three main dimensions. These are: (i) design, (ii) behavioural transparency, and (iii) customer support. These three areas of social responsibility are within the wider sphere of more general corporate social responsibility that can include areas such as compliance to codes of conduct, age limits to prevent underage play, and general support for social impact initiatives.

Design mainly falls into two areas for the gaming industry – design of gaming venues (e.g., environmental design of venues such as casinos, betting shops) and design of games (e.g., instant win games on the Internet, lottery product portfolios). Behavioural transparency covers those





areas where the gaming industry imparts information about games to players (e.g., advertising, product purchase, staying in control), or feedback about player behaviour (e.g., behavioural monitoring). These diverse forms of information dissemination practice should be honest and imparted with integrity.

Customer support relates to all those practices that either helps staff to understand player behaviour (e.g., ongoing staff training) or helps players get any help they need in relation to their playing behaviour (e.g., staff intervention and good referral services to helping agencies). The following section highlights some of the more specific areas of social responsibility practice within these three dimensions along with some salient areas within general corporate social responsibility. However, the areas discussed below are somewhat generic. Specific forms of gambling (e.g., Internet gambling) may also have additional specific social responsibility considerations.

### CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*Industry compliance to codes of conduct* – Operators within the gaming industry should adhere not only to government regulators but also to the codes of conduct and practice formulated by their trade associations. Furthermore, all personnel should be made aware of and understand the codes.

*Access by minors* – Children and adolescents need to be protected. In all instances, access to gambling by under-aged minors should be prohibited. Operators or their agents should prominently display the minimum age of entry and not make external premises attractive to children. There should be a sufficiently controlled and supervised point of entry to make illegal gambling difficult. This means that self-service lottery terminals should be prohibited unless they are supervised. There should also be strict sanctions for those operators or individuals who are caught selling to minors. High street gambling should therefore be restricted to well-regulated, age-controlled, properly supervised specific gambling venues where staff understand issues relative to gambling.

*Support for social impact initiatives* – One of the ways that the gaming industry can be effective in the area of social responsibility is to support social impact initiatives. Recognition of a socially responsible approach is mutually beneficial to the industry as well as the players. Initiatives include (i) financial support to those organisations that develop gambling treatment, training, education and research programmes, (ii) support and encouragement of such organisations (including consultation with the industry at planning, design and promotion stages), and (iii) uptake of training programmes by such organisations.

*Commitment to social responsibility* – Operators need to develop a culture that is supported by socially responsible policies and procedures. It is in everyone's interest to recognise that social responsibility is fundamental to the long-term development of the gaming industry. Operators should have to attain a certificate of social responsibility or some kind of external accreditation or audit before improved products or agreed deregulation can be introduced. These would be awarded after passing an external social audit. On a wider level, companies should also consider how their activities support their local community and give consideration to the social impact of their products.

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## DESIGN

*Game and gaming environment design* – Although gambling behaviour can be influenced by a person's individual risk factors (e.g., genetic predispositions, personality factors, social environment in which the person was raised), gaming operators have responsibility for the ways in which players are attracted to play on their products (e.g., ease of accessibility in gambling, advertising to attract custom, incentive bonuses to gamble), the design of their environments in attracting people to gamble (e.g., the use of light, colour, sound and music in gambling venues), and the design of the gambling product itself (e.g., game speed, prize structure, jackpot size, and illusion of control features on a slot machine). Games should be designed to limit excessive play in environments designed for customer enhancement rather than purely about maximising short-term profits (see Griffiths, Wood, Parke and Parke [2007] for some initiatives to help in this area).

## BEHAVIOURAL TRANSPARENCY

*Advertising and promotion* – Quite clearly it is appropriate that gaming industry needs to advertise and promote its facilities. In addition to conforming to each country's own advertising codes of practice, the most important recommendation would be that advertisements and promotions should not appeal to vulnerable members of society (such as minors, those with severe learning difficulties and problem gamblers). Potential players should also be given all the information they are likely to need to make an informed choice (such as the chances of winning on the activity or the payout ratios). There is also an implicit assumption that all the games will be fair and designed in such a way to protect the player.

*Information about staying in control* – Although players are clearly responsible for their own gambling, they should still be reminded of the need to exercise control. Information in the form of posters or leaflets should highlight the need to stay in control, and be prominently displayed where it will be seen by players.

*Product purchase* – Providing help and advice to players is to be commended. However, players should under no circumstances be encouraged to (i) increase the amount of money they have decided to gamble with, (ii) enter into continuous gambling for a prolonged period of time, (iii) re-gamble their winnings, or (iv) chase losses.

*Monitoring player behaviour* – The monitoring of player behaviour on remote gambling sites (e.g., Internet gambling) or via smart cards is becoming increasingly popular with

gaming operators. However, such technologies should be harnessed for protective and helpful intervention rather than be used to get heavy spending players to spend even more. The money generated by problem gamblers should not be a core marketing strategy of any socially responsible operator.

## CUSTOMER SUPPORT

*Staff training* – Ongoing staff training around the area of social responsibility should be given at all levels to all those working in the gaming industry. Awareness-raising of such issues is a necessity to enable staff to deal with relevant situations. Staff should also be able to identify aspects of policy and practice relative to appropriate intervention that will contribute to minimising the harm attributable to uncontrolled gambling.

*Appropriate staff intervention* – Intervening in the case of a suspected problem gambler is a sensitive issue. Staff need to be trained to deal with such situations and must also know what to do if they are approached by someone who needs help.

*Providing information and/or help for those with gambling problems* – At the core of exercising a duty of care lies the principle of assisting players to address any concern about their gambling. Telephone helplines and addresses of helping agencies can be displayed on posters, leaflets, and on the back of lottery tickets or smart cards. Information should be freely available without having to ask a member of staff and should be placed in areas of high accessibility (e.g., a poster in a toilet, leaflets at the exit door). Gaming operators should also have a good referral system with local and/or national helping agencies.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

We have been working in the field of responsible gambling for many years and it is a field that has expanded considerably over the last decade. However, despite this increase in interest by both academic researchers and gaming operators it is often difficult for research to be translated into practical responsible gambling applications. Partly, this is because research is largely published in academic journals and mostly read by other academics. Figure 1 highlights the traditional relationship of information dissemination between academic researchers and the industry. Not only did academics and practitioners rarely speak to the gaming industry (and vice versa) but the areas of focus were typically specific. For instance, academics and practitioners traditionally focussed on problem gamblers, and the gaming

industry traditionally focussed on profit and traditional gamblers in one medium (mostly males in offline premises) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Traditional dissemination relationship between academic researchers/clinicians and the gaming industry**

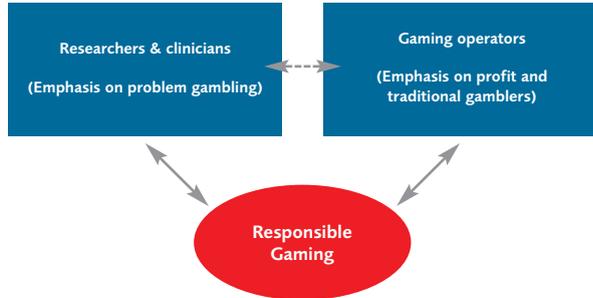


Figure 2 highlights the emerging model of information dissemination between the two stakeholders. Academics and practitioners now have a wide range of interests in the area (including 'social gambling', marketing, interdisciplinary research). The gaming industry has also expanded their horizons and has interests in a wide variety of areas (including corporate social responsibility, multi-media platforms, brand psychology, non-male gamblers, and entertainment more generally).

**Figure 2: Emerging dissemination relationship between academic researchers/clinicians and the gaming industry via IRGO**



As academic researchers we know that there is a lot of research information out there in a wide variety of outlets (e.g. psychology journals, sociology journals, criminology journals, social policy journals, economics journals, and journals specialising in gaming, gambling, addiction and

leisure, etc.). But how can a gaming operator be sure that they have access to the latest information and that the information they have has credibility? Furthermore, how can this research be translated into effective responsible gaming initiatives? On the whole, responsible gaming personnel do not have the time or resources to continually search for all the latest relevant research articles, to read them cover to cover, evaluate them, and consider how they can be practically applied. Their major concern is to implement and monitor effective strategies within their company which in itself is a full-time task.

There is a need then for a service that brings this research together, evaluates its credibility, and makes practical suggestions for how it can be used. This is why we as a group of international academic responsible gaming researchers founded the International Responsible Gaming Organisation (IRGO). The inaugural conference was recently held in Stockholm, sponsored by *Svenska Spel*, and had over 110 delegates from 23 countries coming together to hear about some of the latest responsible gaming research findings and practises from around the world.

The aim of IRGO is to:

- Provide worldwide up-to-date research findings
- Produce summaries of key research studies and findings
- Suggest practical applications of research in relation to social responsibilities
- Undertake specific literature reviews on social responsibility practices by request
- Provide updates of responsible gaming news items
- Provide a reference archive database of academic (and other) journal articles
- Provide an opportunity for discussion among operators via secure intranet
- Host an annual conference to disseminate the very latest in social responsibility initiatives from both industry and academia.

To do this we have gathered together a group of expert gaming researchers and clinicians from around the world to ensure that IRGO provides the most-up-to-date world-wide evidence available. These include academics and clinicians from North America (Dr Henry Lesieur, Dr Jeff Derevensky), Australia (Dr Paul Delfabbro) and Europe (Dr Gerhard Mayer, Thomas Nilsson, Dr Jonathan Parke). Information is disseminated via the IRGO website ([www.International-Responsible-Gaming.org](http://www.International-Responsible-Gaming.org)) and is provided to gaming operators via a subscription service.

As the global economy and the market interests guide political decision-making, the topic of social responsibility by

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gambling companies has been taken up in public discussions across many different countries worldwide. Social responsibility has come to provide a natural basis for the economic activities of the gaming industry. The industry has increasingly responded in a serious manner to the issue of problem gambling and its social impact and there is a push on responsible gambling throughout the gaming industry. Whatever the reasons for increased emphasis in social responsibility, the gaming industry needs access to the latest innovations and research findings to ensure that responsible gaming initiatives continue to provide their players with a low impact enjoyable gaming experience. **CGI**

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Dr Richard Wood is a Chartered Psychologist and has been studying gaming behaviour for over 12 years, mostly at the International Gaming Research Unit (IGRU) at Nottingham Trent University where he is still an associate member. He also worked as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at The International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviours at McGill University in Montreal. Dr Wood has published numerous gambling related articles, presented his findings at conferences and seminars around the world, and undertaken many responsible gaming consultations for both the gaming industry and regulatory sectors. His research focuses on both the individual causes of problem gambling, as well as the structural characteristics of games that can influence the gambling behaviour of vulnerable players (info@GamRes.org www.GamRes.org)



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