

Putting responsible gambling, theory and research into practice: Introducing the *Responsible Gambling Review*

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Welcome to the launch of *Responsible Gambling Review (RGR)*. As way of an introduction, we thought some background would be helpful to explain the purpose, aims and scope of this new journal, and the role that we hope it will play in moving the gambling studies field forward.

Over the last 15 years or so, the field of responsible gambling (RG) has developed from a basic interest in minimising gambling problems, to a fast-growing field of research, theory, and practice covering all aspects of the gambling experience. Even in the recent past, RG was typically the remit of perhaps one or two individuals in an organisation, maybe just a minor part of their primary role. However, over the last few years and in many gaming companies, RG has become a concept embraced at all levels from the CEO down to the point-of-sale retailer, and all those in between. Whilst some of this focus has been driven through regulatory policy and an increased awareness of problem gambling across many jurisdictions, much of the interest stems from a realisation that problem-free players make for a better business. That is, long-term customers are going to be those who continue to play, without problems, primarily for reasons of leisure. In short, proactive gaming companies have developed socially responsible business models, that are based on increasing the number of moderate-spending, long-term repeat customers and, that strive to avoid custom from players with gambling problems.

The expansion of RG practice has been accompanied by an overall shift of perspective in relation to research and theory. Previously, RG was largely influenced by a view of gambling problems that primarily adopted a medical and/or disease model, with little control or power attributed to those that were most negatively affected. However, increasing support for individual autonomy has become the important issue (Bernhard, 2007; Reith, 2009). This position, was outlined in detail by the “Reno Model” (Blaszczynski, Ladouceur, & Shaffer, 2004) which argues that responsible gambling programs should be based upon two fundamental principles: (1) decisions to gamble reside with the individual and represent a choice, and (2) in order to make good decisions, individuals need to be well informed.

This shift in perspective also reflects wider social and cultural changes that have seen more of an emphasis on the importance of consumers making informed purchase choices across a variety of products and services – whether reading

nutritional labels for dietary purposes or clearly understanding the implications of signing credit agreements. As is the case in a number of commercial settings, facilitating RG through *informed player choice* has become a major priority in building RG policy and strategy – an approach that reflects the fact that millions of participants willingly gamble worldwide every day as a legitimate and problem-free leisure activity (Wood & Bernhard, 2010).

Partly as a driving force, and partly in response to the developing field of RG, the number of research studies in this area has been steadily increasing. This has both helped to shape RG theory and improve upon the overall effectiveness of gaming company RG policies, procedures and protocols. Consequently, the range of responsible gambling tools and features has expanded considerably, to include a diverse range of initiatives such as: enhanced player information and support services, self-diagnostic tests, behavioral tracking and feedback, pre-commitment and limit-setting (for both time and money), dynamic warning messages, educational videos, and game risk analysis (see for example: Auer & Griffiths, 2013; Auer, Malischnig & Griffiths, 2014; Bernhard, Lucas, & Jang, 2006; Griffiths, Wood & Parke, 2009; Monaghan, 2008; 2009; Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2007; 2010a; 2010b; Nisbet, 2005; Sharpe et al, 2005; Williams, West & Simpson, 2007; Wohl et al, 2010; 2011; Wood & Bernhard, 2010; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Wood, Shorter & Griffiths, 2014).

At the same time, technological developments have become a driving force, for both the design of games and gambling environments, as well as for tools and services that can assist players to play responsibly. As Wood, Shorter and Griffiths (2013) recently reported in a Delphi study comprising of RG experts, treatment providers, and recovered problem gamblers, there are now many more RG features available for Internet-based games than there are for traditional offline venue-based games. For example, the study identified 34 RG features that might be utilized for Internet bingo games, whereas for traditional bingo in a bingo hall, casino, or gaming centre only 15 such RG features were identified. The nature of Internet based gambling is such that there is arguably a greater capacity than with traditional offline games in (i) controlling the gaming environment (e.g., the look and sound of the game), (ii) changing the characteristics of the actual game (e.g., the speed and duration of a game), (iii) providing players with limit-setting tools (e.g., player-defined spend and time limits), (iv) providing players with behavioral feedback (e.g., alerting players when their behavior has significantly changed over a specific time period), (v) providing players with instant referral to online support services (e.g. www.GamTalk.org), and (vi) educating players through entertaining and animated vignettes that almost appear to be a part of the game itself.

However, whilst there has been an expansion in research and technological developments in the RG field, the translation of research into wide-spread practice has sometimes been slower to take effect. Furthermore, staying up-to-date on the latest developments can be a difficult and time-consuming process. A major barrier being that research is typically published in a broad collection of subject-specific journals (e.g., psychology, sociology, social policy, law, etc.) as well as broadly focused gambling related journals. Within these journals, articles and papers on RG are interspersed amongst numerous other articles that are often concerned with

issues focused on problem gambling. Furthermore, the reporting of such findings has, according to the tradition of academic publishing, usually involved rather lengthy theoretical and methodological discussions with little consideration for translating findings into practical applications that can be readily utilized by the gaming industry or gaming regulators. In practice, it is too often the case that an RG-related article is read by only a handful of people, usually other academics, and is consigned to the university library where access is restricted to other university staff and students. In addition, by the time research is published, it may already be out of date. Added to this, the lengthy process involved in traditional publishing, can mean that it often takes a year or more before important papers are finally printed.

To address these issues, the *RGR* has opted for a free-to-access online format, by which papers and articles can be published very quickly following the peer review process, with no need to wait whilst a series of papers are gathered together for a printed edition. Once a paper is accepted, the *RGR* can publish it online and it will be accessible to everyone. Bridging the gap between research and practice – as well as making RG knowledge more accessible – are the key aims of *RGR*. Through a focus on (i) translating research into more easily digestible and user-friendly writing, (ii) summarizing key findings, and (iii) highlighting actionable strategies, *RGR*'s aim is to engage with a much wider audience than has traditionally been the case. In addition, the inclusion of reports on the experiences and practices of applying RG provide an opportunity to share best practices and highlight where the application of RG theory and practice is making progress. To date, the field of RG has lacked a focal point by which to bring together knowledge and experience of practicing RG. However, by sharing knowledge and experience freely we can better learn what works, what doesn't, and what holds potential for the future. Through a focus on communicating research, practical experience, and issues directly related to RG, we hope *RGR* will provide some helpful direction and continuity in this rapidly expanding field.

We would like to express our warmest thanks to those people that have contributed to our inaugural issue. We look forward to hearing more from you again and from other colleagues (e.g., other RG staff, regulators, researchers etc.) who wish to share their RG experiences, RG research findings, and discuss RG issues.

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