

FREE GAMES

The costs of playing free games on gambling websites

One of the most common ways to entice gamblers to play online is to make them try out games in 'demo', 'practice' or 'free play' mode. At one level, most would argue that playing for points rather than money is little more than innocuous fun. However, is this really the case? Dr. Mark Griffiths and Abby McCormack, of Nottingham Trent University, and Dr Jonathan Parke, of the University of Salford, examine some of the real costs of playing free online games on gambling websites.

It could perhaps be argued that playing games for free online is akin to 'skill schools' that exist offline, such as learning poker or blackjack in a casino. Offline, there are many constraints to 'learning to play', as the free opportunities may only be available on certain days and at certain times. Our observations on online gambling sites suggest there is a lot of scope for players to practice games for free before they play with real money. They can practice in their own time and from the comfort of their own home. Therefore, a complicated or difficult game may not deter people from gambling online because they can practice this game until they are confident enough to bet with real money. Additionally, gambling in practice modes may build self-efficacy and potentially increase perceptions of control in determining gambling outcomes, motivating participation in their 'real cash' counterparts within the site¹.

Despite the undoubted positives, there are other not so positive aspects that have been identified. For instance, some research carried out² showed it was significantly more commonplace to win while

'gambling' on the first few goes on a 'demo' or 'free play' game compared to when people actually gamble with real money. Research also reported that it was commonplace for gamblers to have extended winning streaks during prolonged periods while playing in the 'demo' modes. Obviously, once gamblers start to play for real with real money, the odds of winning are considerably reduced.

Over the last decade, there have been a number of papers published examining potentially exploitative gambling-like experiences engaged in by people, including instant win games in snacks like crisps and chocolate³, betting with virtual money via social networking sites⁴, gambling-like experiences within online video games⁵, and pseudo-gambling experiences via online penny auctions⁶. Some clinical researchers have asserted that youth gambling in money-free mode may be a cause for concern⁷. Although there is a general lack of empirical research in these areas, there have been a number of studies examining young people's use of 'free play' games on internet gambling sites. This is most likely because youth have been identified as one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to the development of gambling problems⁸.

A Canadian study⁹ of 2,087 adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 24 years (43% of males, 57% of females) reported that more individuals under the age of 18 years than those aged 18 to 24 years played 'free play' games on internet gambling sites (43% v 33% for males and 42% v 29% for females). The most popular form of 'free play' activity for those under and over the age of 18 years was playing cards - poker and blackjack. Another Canadian study¹⁰ surveyed 1,876 high school students aged 14 to 18 years, and

reported that 35% of youths (49% of males, 21% of females) had played on 'free play' mode on internet gambling sites. Males were significantly more likely than females to play the 'free play' modes on internet gambling sites. The study also reported that most adolescent online gamblers began by playing in the 'free play' mode before going on to play for money, i.e. the 'free play' option provided the 'foot-in-the-door' and/or 'gateway' into playing for money¹¹. A number of North American studies have reported that anywhere between 25% to 50% of teenagers have played 'free play' games via internet gambling sites.

In Great Britain, 8,017 young people aged between 12 and 15 years were asked about their internet gambling behaviour on National Lottery products. Of those who had gambled on the internet, a quarter of the adolescents said they had played free instant win games on the internet (24%). In a follow-up British study, Ipsos MORI¹² surveyed 8,598 pupils who reported that just over a quarter of the sample had played in 'money-free mode' on internet sites in the week preceding the survey - including gambling-type games on social networking sites such as Facebook. Further analysis of this data¹³ reported that gambling in money-free mode was the single most important predictor of whether the child had gambled for money, and one of the most important predictors of children's problem gambling. It also reported a number of socio-demographic indicators of those adolescents most likely to 'gamble' on 'play for free' mode in the specified time period including being male, having a black or white ethnic background, earning or receiving £30 in the last week, and having parents who were gamblers.

However, the possibility and extent to which money-free gambling is responsible for real gambling participation and gambling-related risk and harm could only be confirmed using longitudinal data. Studies such as those highlighted have led to allegations that such opportunities encourage teenagers to practice before graduating to playing for money games at online casinos⁴, and that a precautionary principle should be applied which prevents adolescents from being exposed to gambling-like experiences. However, the specific impact of money-free play on both adolescents and adults remains unclear. Despite the strong correlation of money-free play with both gambling participation and problem gambling among youth, there is currently no conclusive evidence to suggest that money-free play causes individuals to start gambling for actual money or to be more at risk of experiencing gambling related harm, although there is a growing body of correlational evidence.

From this small body of empirical data, there is evidence to suggest that money-free gambling appears to play an important role for adolescents in conceptualising and experiencing internet gambling. However, there have been significant regulatory developments in recent years, with improved codes of practice requiring that age verification also applies to demo modes and that such modes should be an accurate representation of the real playing experience, including the chances of winning and the rate of return to the player. Based on the available literature, it may be important to distinguish between the different types of money-free gambling being made available - namely social networking modes and 'demo' or 'free play' modes. Initial considerations suggest that these

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may be different both in nature and in impact. Players gambling in social networking modes may experience a different type and level of reinforcement than those gambling in 'demo' mode. On some social networking sites, the accumulation of 'play money' or 'points' may have implications for buying virtual goods or services or being eligible for certain privileges. This may increase the value and meaning of the gambling event to the individual. Secondly, when considering the 'flow' and intention of individuals accessing such sites, it could be argued that individuals accessing money-free gambling through social networking sites may be more likely to be induced or persuaded to play given that these website visitors' primary intention may have been social interaction, as opposed to those playing in 'demo' mode, where gambling is the primary function of the website. In the study by Ipsos MORI, four or five times more children reported money-free gambling on social networking sites compared to 'demo' or 'free play' modes on gambling websites. It is suggested that the nature and impact of various forms of money-free gambling should be the subject of further research and empirical investigation.

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