

e-commerce law & policy

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Reducing addiction risk in developing online games

The International Gaming Research Unit and Camelot, the operator of the UK's National Lottery, have developed a gaming risk-assessment tool to help protect vulnerable individuals from addiction risk, when developing games. Professor Mark Griffiths, Dr. Richard Wood and Jonathan Parke explain how the new tool, GAM-GaRD, works.

The International Gaming Research Unit (IGRU) comprises a team of experienced gaming researchers that work together to undertake research and consultancy aimed at developing effective responsible gaming strategies. During late 2006 to mid-2007, the IGRU - in conjunction with Camelot Group Plc (the National Lottery operator) - helped to develop a more effective process for developing socially responsible games. The new gaming risk assessment tool, called GAM-GaRD (Gambling Assessment Measure - Guidance about Responsible Design), is an innovative assessment tool that will help online and land-based gaming companies design games that reduce the risk for vulnerable individuals. It can also prevent money being wasted on the development of a game that might otherwise be potentially problematic.

Structural characteristics (which at a basic level are simply features which manufacturers design into their gaming products) appear to be an increasingly important factor in the development and maintenance of gambling behaviour. By identifying and understanding how games are structured (i.e. game design and associated features) we are trying to unravel what makes some games problematic for vulnerable and susceptible players, what makes them playable or fun for social players and, therefore,

what makes it engaging and commercially successful.

We have conducted lots of research on structural and situational characteristics, including the things that get people to gamble in the first place (such as advertising, the accessibility of products, the use of inducements, design of the gambling venue, etc.) and the individual characteristics of gambling types and products that get people gambling repeatedly (such as the speed of the game, the use of 'near win' features, how quickly money is paid back to the punter, the use of lights, colours and sounds on a slot machine, etc.). The identification of these types of characteristics has important implications for educating and informing various stakeholders.

Gaming industry

Information about potentially risky features of games can help the industry with their responsible gaming strategies. By examining and reducing the risk of games during the development stages, it is possible to design games that will have the minimum negative impact. Such an approach would help in reducing the numbers of vulnerable players who go on to develop gambling problems.

Players

Information may empower players to gamble in a responsible way if we can help them to understand, identify and even adjust to such cues by either avoiding or exercising caution when playing high-risk games. For example, players engaging in games that have high event frequencies could aim to be more cautious, if they know that they could spend money faster or chase their losses easier.

Clinicians

Information ensures clinicians

have the appropriate knowledge to help problem gamblers through education and/or challenging cognitive biases and irrational beliefs. Structural awareness of games may also help identify information about a player's motivation by examining the type and form of gambling preferred. In a clinical sense, this may yield new information regarding player motivation that could inform any subsequent intervention.

The importance of a structural characteristic approach to gambling is in the possibility to pinpoint more accurately where an individual's psychological make-up is influencing gambling behaviour. This approach also allows for psychologically context-specific explanations of gambling behaviour rather than global explanations, such as 'addictive personality'. It also allows for the application of the extensive research that demonstrates the structural and situational 'triggers' that can adversely influence the gambling behaviour of vulnerable players.

Although most gambling-inducing structural characteristics (e.g. event frequency and consequent reinforcement) are dependent on individual psychological factors, they are a direct result of the structural characteristics and could not have influenced gambling behaviour independently. This is what we have described as a 'psycho-structural' interaction. In short, structural characteristics are still capable of producing psychologically rewarding experiences even in financially losing situations (e.g. the psychology of the near miss).

In some cases, some of the more technologically advanced structural characteristics have an even greater potential to induce excessive gambling. Interactive feature plays,

increased skill orientations, faster and more continuous game play and better graphical interfaces all combine to produce sophisticated and psychologically immersive games. Therefore, any effective measures aimed at reducing the risk of ‘vulnerable players’ developing problems need to consider the ‘risky’ elements of games during development.

GAM-GaRD was developed through a combination of examining the current state of research on structural and situational characteristics worldwide by employing a team of leading world experts, in terms of researching responsible gambling issues and treating problem gamblers. The advisory panel comprised the IGRU team and other world experts from the US (Dr. Henry Lesieur), Canada (Dr. Robert Ladouceur, Dr. Jeff Derevensky), Australia (Dr. Alex Blaszczynski) and Germany (Dr. Gerhard Meyer). Final testing of the measure compared the results to the known risks associated with established games. GAM-GaRD is now available under licence to the whole gambling sector. If desired, those wishing to use the instrument can be given training by the IGRU as part of any company’s social responsibility and/or game design staff development programmes.

GAM-GaRD can be used to identify the structural and situational characteristics of games that present the greatest risks for excessive play. GAM-GaRD provides each game tested with a total score that gives a ‘traffic light’ rating (i.e., green = low risk for vulnerable players; amber =

Structural awareness of games may also help identify information about a player’s motivation

medium risk; red = high risk). GAM-GaRD identifies which elements of a game, if any, are problematic so that they can be ‘adjusted’ to make the game safer or can be combined with other external measures of social responsibility in an effort to reduce overall harm. GAM-GaRD was designed so that it can be used to assess any gambling type game by anyone with a basic knowledge of the features of the game. For example, the measure can be used by game developers, responsible gaming personnel and game regulators.

It is important to note that a ‘red’ rating does not necessarily imply or mean that a game should not be introduced into the marketplace. If a game is identified as having some problematic features, there are a number of options and strategies that can be considered and implemented:

- Change one or more of the individual characteristics of the game to lower the overall score. It is possible to use the measure to identify the specific problematic features of the game in order to adjust the game accordingly. For example, if the game scores high on event frequency, then measures can be introduced to slow the game down and lower the overall score. If a game scored high on continuity of play, then breaks could be put in place between the end of one game and the start of another.
- Employ more market protection and preventative strategies. If a game scores highly, other protective and preventative responsible gaming initiatives might be introduced to limit,

control, or minimise the affect of the game. For example, an online game may be restricted in terms of the hours that it is made available, or weekly spend limits could be introduced. Players who lose a certain amount might be prompted to reconsider whether they wish to continue playing. Other socially responsible strategies may be avoiding placing gaming machines in socially deprived areas, away from younger players, or where alcohol is prevalent.

- Abandon the game. In some cases, the game may be abandoned or require such serious modifications that the game becomes unfeasible, unprofitable and/or unattractive to players.

This first version of GAM-GaRD incorporates the most contemporary and up-to-date research findings in the field of international gambling studies, as well as direct clinical experience from those working with ‘problem’ and ‘at risk’ gamblers. Over time, further research will be published on existing structural characteristics. Furthermore, new forms of structural and situational characteristics are likely to emerge. Consequently, our measure will be reviewed annually to ensure that it can take into account any new technological changes or newly published empirical research.

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