In this article, the authors evaluate evidence for the ‘gateway’ hypothesis. The gateway hypothesis suggests that online video gaming predicts gambling in the future. Much of the concern stems from the increasing cross-over between gambling and video gaming. Many video games now include gambling-like activities. Of particular concern is loot boxes, which are in-game items that give out random prizes. People can earn loot boxes through regular gameplay or purchase loot boxes with real money. Some researchers have argued that loot boxes are similar to gambling. Both involve staking something of value for an outcome that is determined by chance.

According to the authors, one reason for the cross-over between gambling and video gaming is ‘digital convergence’. Here, digital convergence refers to when dissimilar activities become available on the same digital platform or device. This allows users to switch from one activity to another easily. Another reason may be commercial. The market for video games has grown exponentially in the last decade in comparison to the gambling market. It is likely that the gambling industry would have a commercial interest in expanding beyond its existing market.

The authors review three lines of evidence. The first is for video gaming and gambling participation. The second is whether problem video gaming is associated with problem gambling. The third line of evidence is the association between loot boxes and gambling.

What was done?
The authors searched for studies using the database Scopus. They only included studies that had been peer-reviewed, presented statistical data, and published in English. The authors excluded studies on social casino games because they considered social casino games to be different from other types of video games. Social casino games are games that simulate gambling and are available on social media. The authors reviewed 30 studies published between 1995 to 2020. Only 18 studies specifically examined the relationship between video gaming and gambling.

What you need to know
Video Gaming and Gambling Participation

The authors found many challenges when trying to draw clear conclusions about the relationship between video gaming and gambling. Some studies were based on young people under the age of 18, whereas others included adults, or both adults and adolescents. Furthermore, some studies specifically recruited video game players. Others recruited both...
players and non-players. These challenges made it difficult to compare the results of different studies. It was also difficult to determine if the results could be generalized to a broader population.

Only a few studies reported specifically on video gaming and gambling participation. Their findings suggest that people who play video games are more likely to gamble, and vice versa. The authors caution that such a relationship does not imply video gaming causes gambling or that gambling causes video gaming. The relationship can be due to some underlying factors. In particular, young age, being male, and having a tendency to take risks.

A further issue is the level of involvement. As reported by some studies, people who play video games at an intensive level may have little interest in gambling. Video game players may not consider gambling to involve the same level of skill as required in gaming.

Problem video gaming and problem gambling

There are mixed findings about whether problem video gaming is associated with problem gambling. Some studies found that people who had problems with video gaming tended to have problems with gambling as well. However, other studies did not find an association. The only longitudinal study reported that problem video gaming did not predict problem gambling after taking into account age and gender.

Loot box spending and gambling

There is evidence for an association between loot boxes and gambling. Several studies reported that people who spent more money on loot boxes were more likely to be higher-risk gamblers. The authors caution that it could be a selection effect. That is, people who already have problems with gambling may be attracted to loot boxes, as they involve elements of risk and chance, similar to gambling.

Future research directions

The authors suggest several directions for future research. First, there is a need for more longitudinal studies with larger and more representative participant samples. Secondly, future research will need to separate out general transition from ‘maturation’ effects. Young people may go from video gaming to gambling as they grow older and can legally gamble. This is different from when one activity actually influences the other. Thirdly, future research will need to clarify and refine the gateway hypothesis.

Who is it intended for?

This review is for researchers, regulators, and policy makers concerned with video gaming and gambling.

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Citation


Study funding

No funding was received for this review.

About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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