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Family geographies and parenting practices in relation to loot boxes and gambling-style systems in video games

What this research is about

This study proposed new social scientific framings for understanding digital geographies in everyday family life. There are international debates surrounding loot boxes and other paid reward systems in video games, which blur the boundaries between gaming and gambling. Geographers have been central to advancing ideas that spatial environments are important. For example, home and school shape children and young people's everyday lives. Yet, these spaces are also sites of contestation and negotiation with respect to adult-child power relationships.

This study explored the socio-spatial interactions between children and parents at home, as these interactions are vital to understanding how parents and children navigate the blurring boundaries between gaming and gambling. The researchers define digital parenting as how parents regulate their children's relation with digital media, and how parents incorporate digital media in their daily activities and parenting practices.

What the researchers did

The researchers drew on data collected for a 3-year project based in England. The project had 3 phases. First, the researchers recruited 42 families from Northeast of England. Participants were mainly White British families. This first phase collected over 100 hours of video ethnography with 52 children and youth (46 boys and 6 girls) who were between 5 and 17 years. All of these children and youth played digital games with loot boxes and other paid reward systems. Sessions of them playing games and the spatial arrangements of their home were recorded.

What you need to know

This study explored digital geographies and geographies of home in relation to gaming. The researchers proposed social, seasonal, and limited time as social scientific framings for understanding the impacts of loot boxes and other gambling-style systems in digital games on everyday family life. They drew on data collected for a three year project based in England. The dataset included video recordings of children and youth playing games at home, as well as interviews with parents and game designers. The researchers explored how parents navigated children's requests for purchases, rules, rewards, and pocket money.

For the second phase of the project, the researchers interviewed 20 parents (15 mothers and 5 fathers). They asked the parents about their understandings and experiences of paid reward systems in digital games. The interviews aimed to capture the parents' attitudes and parenting practices.

The third and final phase involved 10 interviews with game producers and designers who were based in Europe and North America. The interviews focused on technical expertise and decision making processes in game production. It also explored the insights of game producers and designers on the effects of paid reward systems on people who engage in digital games.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that children's gaming was a conflicted reality for parents. Parents wanted to safeguard their children from harm. Yet, they allowed access to loot boxes as their children enjoyed these games. Most parents considered loot boxes as

gambling products and felt like they were stuck in a vulnerable position. They had concerns about loot boxes and in-game currency, but they also understood digital games' popularity in their children's life. Many parents justified the decision to allow their children to make in-game purchases due to the social benefits of gaming. But some parents voiced concerns about potential harms, including bullying and peer pressure.

The researchers found that home was the central space for gaming activity. A variety of spatial arrangements within the home space were made. For families with younger children, game consoles were often found in communal spaces. For teenagers, consoles were moved to their bedroom.

Parents and extended family members were crucial in providing funds for making in-game purchases. Pocket money was the most popular way for buying in-game currency. In-game currency was also sometimes gifted as a one-off reward or as a present for Christmas or birthdays through gift cards. Parents mentioned struggling over control of purchasing decisions and making compromises. Many parents shared that their one-off purchase turned into long-term financial commitment. Parents often mentioned incidents of overspending which led to a tightening of existing rules, including setting monthly limits. Children sometimes expressed regret about their purchases or considered them a waste.

The researchers proposed social, seasonal, and limited time as crucial for understanding how loot boxes and paid reward systems in digital games affect family routines and parenting practices. 'Social time' captures how social gaming is embedded in timed challenges and leaderboard competitions. These features encourage children and youth to be alert and ready for new features or items to 'drop'. These features also create events in gameplay that can disrupt household management or other events at home. 'Seasonal time' encourages children and youth to play more often and expect other events on the horizon, such as the release of new game versions. Finally, 'limited time' refer to deals with time limit, causing pressure and heightened requests for in-game currency and loot box purchases.

Social, seasonal, and limited time shape digital geographies of home in new ways and have an impact on everyday family life. They illustrate how digital parenting becomes more than managing screentime.

How you can use this research

This study can be used to better understand the impacts of gaming and gambling within family geographies.

About the researchers

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Citation

Mills, S., Ash, J., & Gordon, R. (2024). Digital geographies of home: Parenting practices in the space between gaming and gambling. *Children's Geographies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2024.2369792>

Study funding

This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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