



The ineffectiveness of Belgium's regulation of loot boxes

What this research is about

Loot boxes are virtual items in video games that produce randomly generated rewards. Loot boxes hide what rewards people will receive (and their value) until after the purchase has been made. Loot boxes have turned into a large revenue-generating channel for the video game industry.

Consumers and policy makers have recently become concerned with the randomized nature of loot boxes. Some believe that they represent a form of unregulated gambling which targets younger audiences. Researchers have reviewed different video games with loot boxes and suggested that loot boxes have important psychological similarities to gambling. Research also shows that loot boxes are related to increased problem gambling severity: people who spend more money on loot boxes are more likely to also experience gambling problems.

In 2018, the Belgian Gaming Commission announced that loot boxes are a form of gambling under existing law. They 'banned' loot boxes by threatening legal action if companies included loot boxes in their games without having applied for a gambling licence. In this article, the author assessed the effectiveness of this loot box 'ban'.

What the researcher did

The researcher selected the 100 highest-grossing iPhone games on the Belgian Apple App Store in May 2022. The Country/Region setting of the Apple ID used was set to Belgium, and the coder travelled to Belgium to ensure they were within the Belgian geographical and legal jurisdiction during data collection. This guaranteed that only the Belgian versions of the games were downloaded. If a game on

What you need to know

Loot boxes are gambling-like mechanisms found in many video games. People buy loot boxes to obtain randomized rewards of varying value. Research indicates that loot box spending is related to problem gambling severity. In 2018, the Belgian Gaming Commission 'banned' loot boxes by threatening legal action against gaming companies with games including loot boxes that do not have gambling licences. In this article, the researcher examined the effectiveness of this 'ban'. After reviewing 100 of the highest-grossing iPhone games in Belgium, the researcher found that the majority of games (82%) still contained loot boxes. Additionally, many of these games were rated suitable for children aged 12 and up. These findings suggest that the Belgian loot box 'ban' is ineffective. The researcher suggests that a less restrictive approach, such as the adoption of ethical game designs and the development of educational campaigns, may be more successful.

the list was no longer available for download or was a duplicate of a higher-ranked game, it was excluded from the sample and replaced with the next highest-ranking game (e.g., the 101st highest-grossing game).

The characteristics of each game were coded. The researcher examined the Apple age rating and the presence of paid loot boxes. The latter was determined by playing each game for up to one hour. If a paid loot box was not identified within one hour, the game was coded as not including paid loot boxes. For games with paid loot boxes, screenshots were

captured of the purchase screen and the Apple App Store payment screen. No actual purchase was made.

What the researcher found

Paid loot boxes were widely available among the highest-grossing iPhone games in Belgium. In total, 82% of the games continued to contain paid loot boxes. About 80% of such games were rated suitable for children over the age of 12. None of the games with paid loot boxes were produced by companies with a gambling licence in Belgium.

The researcher chose three games that are widely played across the world. These games were chosen to test the technological measures that gaming companies might have taken to comply with the Belgian 'ban'. First, the UK versions of these games were downloaded before arriving in Belgium. The researcher found that the UK versions of these games allowed loot box purchasing while within Belgium. Secondly, while within Belgium, the researcher found that the UK versions of these games could be downloaded by changing the Country/Region setting of the Apple ID to the UK. Paid loot boxes could also be purchased in this way. Thus, people could easily circumvent the technological measures taken by gaming companies if they wanted to.

The researcher concluded that the Belgian 'ban' on loot boxes has not been enforced effectively. To achieve a better compliance rate, the Belgian Gaming Commission would need to carry out the threat of legal action against non-compliant gaming companies. This would likely forcibly remove loot boxes from the market.

Although the initial proposal of this 'ban' promoted public discussion about loot box regulation, a 'ban' that is not enforced may give the public and policy makers a false sense of security. Additionally, a full ban of loot boxes may not be practical.

How you can use this research

This research can inform countries that are looking to regulate loot boxes. It suggests that it may not be cost-effective or feasible to enforce a perfect loot box 'ban' (although removing loot boxes from, e.g., the

top 500 games might be achievable). As such, a less restrictive approach to loot box regulation should be considered. Other methods include working directly with platform providers, such as the Apple App Store; supporting the development of ethical game designs; and dedicating resources to educational campaigns.

About the researcher

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