

# The Convergence of Gambling and Digital Media: Implications for Gambling in Young People

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**Abstract** Adolescents' use of the Internet and other digital media for the purpose of gambling represents a serious concern in modern society. This paper overviews some of the available monetary and non-monetary forms of gambling within new digital and online media and monetary forms of games with gambling-like experiences. With reference to current psychological knowledge on the risk factors that promote adolescent gambling, it is suggested that new gambling technologies may: (a) make gambling more accessible and attractive to young people, (b) may promote factually incorrect information about gambling, (c) provide an easy escape from real world problems such as depression and social isolation, (d) create a gambling environment that easily facilitates peer pressures to gamble, (e) ease parental transmission of gambling attitudes and beliefs, and (f) make gambling more ubiquitous and socially acceptable. The unique risks of Internet gambling for young people are critically discussed, as well as the lack of restricted classification for video games and other media that feature interactive, non-monetary forms of gambling.

**Keywords** Digital media · Convergence · Adolescent gambling

## Introduction

Technology has long played a role in the innovation of gambling practices (Griffiths 1999, 2003a). In the last decade, the growing popularity of Internet gambling and the convergence of gambling with digital media technologies like mobile phones, interactive television, and video games has drawn increased academic attention (Bell 1999; de Freitas and Griffiths 2008; Griffiths 2008a; Petry 2006). However, the psychological literature remains

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relatively limited with regard to recognising these new ways in which people are able to gamble, as well as explaining how these emergent forms of gambling may influence gambling behaviour. Thus, there is currently a need to explore the potential risks that these forms of gambling may present to vulnerable segments of the gambling population, including adolescents and children.

Given the apparent social relevance of Internet gambling and gambling in different forms of digital media, the lack of theory and research is unusual, particularly as these activities involve hundreds of millions of players worldwide (Meyer et al. 2009). It may be due in part to: (a) the rapid pace at which these technologies have been developed, released into the market, and then superseded by newer technologies, (b) the difficulty in identifying and/or studying providers and/or users of these technologies as compared to those individuals involved in traditional, brick-and-mortar gambling environments, (c) a general confusion as to whether individuals are in fact “gambling” (in the recognised legal and/or psychological sense of the word) within some of these emerging gambling arenas, and (d) the latency period in peer-review publication of research into the psychosocial effects of gambling on the Internet and within new media.

The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the emergence of gambling in deregulated online environments, as well as the convergence of gambling with digital media like video games. This paper has intentionally focused on the possible effects of these technologies on child and adolescent gamblers because these individuals (a) represent the potentially most vulnerable demographic group in the gambling population (Derevenksy and Gupta 2007; Griffiths and Parke 2009), (b) are highly likely to be exposed to gambling as a natural consequence of their involvement with the Internet and new media (de Freitas and Griffiths 2008), (c) are increasingly more likely to be ‘early adopters’ of these new technologies (so called ‘screenagers’) and be more ‘techno-savvy’ (Griffiths 2000) and (d) are perhaps less ‘techno-phobic’ than the adult population (Griffiths 2002).

We provide a brief overview of some of the currently available forms of gambling and gambling-like activities within new digital and online media, and highlight that many of these activities are highly accessible to adolescents and children. We also review the psychological literature on the aetiology of adolescent problem gambling and examine the properties of new gambling technologies that may present greater risks and/or additional pressures for adolescents and children who gamble. In addition, we consider the lack of restricted classification for video games and other media which feature interactive, non-monetary forms of gambling.

### **Gambling, the Internet and Digital Media “Convergence”**

Gambling has entered a digital age, and this has enabled a greater number of gambling choices than ever before. It is no longer necessary for someone to visit a licensed gambling venue in order to gamble; individuals are able to connect to Internet casinos anywhere in the world using a personal computer and modem, or gamble via a mobile phone (Griffiths 2007a), interactive television (Griffiths 2007b) and/or gamble within online video games (McMillen and Grabosky 1998). These new gambling technologies are examples of “convergence”, the blurring of lines of separation between categories of media due to the growing use and influence of digital electronics and high-speed broadband technology (de Freitas and Griffiths 2008).

Adolescents are highly familiar and competent with digital technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones that makes them likely to be exposed to many kinds of

gambling services. This section provides a number of examples of gambling that are available through new digital media, including both monetary and non-monetary forms of gambling. Given the nature of these technologies, this review does not claim to offer a comprehensive list of all gambling services available to users.

The risks of monetary forms of gambling for adolescents have been documented extensively in the psychological and sociological literature (e.g., Delfabbro and Thrupp 2003; Fisher 1993; Griffiths 2002). However, the potential harms of non-monetary forms of gambling for adolescents and children have received less attention. This paper will argue that these forms of gambling may be problematic for adolescents because they promote positive attitudes towards gambling, portray gambling in glamorised and/or misrepresentative ways, and that these activities are freely available and playable by adolescents and children.

### Non-Monetary Forms of Gambling

Researchers have noted many psychological, structural and situational similarities between video games and gambling slot machines (e.g., Griffiths 1999, 2002; Johansson and Gotestam 2004). McBride and Derevensky's (2009) study of 563 adult online gamblers reported that approximately 75% of respondents reported playing gambling type games without money. However, the influence of non-monetary forms of gambling on the initiation of gambling behaviour in adolescents has received limited attention. Some theorists have suggested a link between adolescent video game playing and the adoption of gambling in later life (Brown 1989; Griffiths 1999). For instance, Brown (1989) argued that heavy involvement in video games during adolescence or childhood may create an unhealthy attachment to a gaming machine (see also Selnow's 1984 notion of "electronic friendship"), that may later develop into a pathological dependency on gambling machines in adulthood. Whilst Brown's model has not been empirically examined, there is evidence to suggest that increased exposure to gambling in a population increases the prevalence of gambling and gambling-related problems (Fisher 1993; Hardoon and Derevensky 2001; Abbott 2007). On the assumption that non-monetary forms of gambling may increase exposure to gambling and "popularise" the activity for adolescents, it is worthwhile considering some examples of non-monetary gambling within new and developing digital media.

Many contemporary video games incorporate gambling situations and games of chance into the playing experience. These gambling situations are usually optional for the player, but they are designed to entice the player to earn rewards quickly and further accelerate their progress in the game. For example, in the video game *Fable 2*, the player is able to participate in a number of gambling activities that are modelled on blackjack, roulette, and slot machines. The player can place wagers using the game currency (coins) and may win or lose depending on chance events. In the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, players can enter a casino and play to win virtually unlimited sums of 'in-game' money. In these examples, gambling is portrayed as fun and exciting, with the potential to "win big", and the activity is accompanied by sound and music effects to heighten player arousal. More importantly, these games of chance are presented within the context of a predominantly skill-based game, which may misrepresent the degree of skill required within the gambling scenario (Monaghan et al. 2008). In addition, the in-game option that enables players to "save" and "reload" their progress at any time may act as a "safety net" and encourage a riskier approach to gambling.

Traditional casino games, such as blackjack, poker, and roulette, are also widely available as stand-alone video games. Players can download video game versions of poker,

blackjack and roulette to be played on a personal computer, mobile phone, or a dedicated game console (using online services such as Microsoft's *Xbox Live*), or by playing gambling "applications" on social networking sites such as *Facebook*. Players do not gamble using real money in these games. However, there are opportunities to win large sums of "virtual" money. The social nature of online play also brings associated rewards of recognition from others and beating the competition. Peer influences to gamble may be easily facilitated by the high-speed and text-rich multi-user environment of online gaming. Therefore, in these games, a novice adolescent player may become more confident and develop gambling strategies in the pursuit of greater levels of excitement and peer approval, which may lead to experimentation with monetary forms of gambling.

One of the most common non-monetary forms of gambling is when players try out gambling games in the 'demo', 'practice' or 'free play' mode in online casinos. In a recent national survey of 8,017 British adolescents (aged between 12 and 15 years of age), Griffiths and Wood (2007) reported that 8% admitted to gambling online and that nearly three in ten adolescents who had gambled online reported playing the free 'demo' games (29%). This study showed that, not only are teenagers engaging in non-monetary forms of gambling, but also gambling online with their own money.

More recently in the UK, Ipsos MORI (2009) surveyed 8,598 pupils from 201 schools about their gambling behaviour. Children were also asked about 'gambling-like experiences' which included 'play-for free' or practice modes of real gambling sites and gambling-type games for play money or points on social networking sites. Just over a quarter of adolescents had played in 'money-free mode' in the week preceding the survey, with opportunities on the social networking sites four or five times more popular than those presented on real gambling sites. Using statistical modelling, it was 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. However, it should be noted that this relationship is correlational and not causal.

### Monetary Forms of Gambling

At present, there are approximately 3,000 online gambling sites worldwide that enable players to gamble in traditional games of chance like poker and blackjack, as well as place bets on the outcomes of sports, racing and other events (Griffiths et al. 2009). Recently, there has been debate as to whether some types of online games should be regarded as a form of gambling, in particular those games in which the player can win or lose points that can be transferred into real life currency. For example, in *Second Life*, an interactive virtual world used mainly for social networking, users can convert real life money into the currency of the game world. Until 2007, when anti-online gambling legislation in the U.S. banned all forms of online gambling, users could place wagers in virtual casinos in *Second Life* essentially using real money. Other online worlds, including those of *Project Entropia* and *World of Warcraft*, feature in-game currencies which can be converted at a later point in time to real world currency (Castronova 2005). This means that players can earn money by playing the game. Whilst some online worlds are restricted to adults only, there remains a problem that some adolescents can more easily bypass the age checks than those in real world casinos (Griffiths 2003a). Research has shown that adolescents can (and do) participate in online gaming because parents have paid the credit card-only subscription fees (Griffiths et al. 2004).

It is unclear whether video gaming activities that blend skill and chance elements should be strictly classified as "gambling". Harper (2007) reported that there are online video

game tournaments in which players are being paid “per kill” in the game. The fact that users can make money by playing a video game has raised concerns that these games may be a contemporary form of gambling. Griffiths (2008a) argued that, whilst these games are largely skill-based, there are some similarities between paid online video game sites and online poker sites. He explained that players pay a monthly subscription fee to play the game online, and in return are able to win jackpots, prizes, and awards at random intervals, regardless of the player’s skill level or preferred difficulty level of the game. Additionally, some online games feature advertisements and direct links to online gambling sites that may blur the boundaries between video gaming and gambling even further (McBride and Derevensky 2009). The opportunity to win money by playing video games may be particularly attractive to adolescents, who are typically unemployed or work in low-paying casual employment.

### Monetary Forms of Games with Gambling-Like Experiences

In addition to gambling and video gaming, there are new hybrid forms of entertainment and commercial activity featuring gambling-like experiences being introduced. These hybrid forms of entertainment—such as interactive television (i-TV) gaming (Griffiths, 2004) and online penny auctions—are likely have implications for children and adolescents.

Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in the number of television shows raising revenue through the use of interactive programming in which viewers call into the show using a premium rate telephone service to either answer simple quiz questions or vote somebody out of a reality TV show like *Big Brother* (Griffiths 2004, 2006, 2007a, b). It could be argued that in many interactive television quizzes, viewers are participating in a lottery. For instance, viewers are typically asked to call a premium rate telephone line and asked to answer a very simple question. A winner is then chosen from all those viewers getting the correct answers. This, to all intents and purposes, is a lottery. It could also be argued that the viewer is staking money (i.e., the cost of the premium rate telephone call) on the outcome of a future event (i.e., whether they predict the correct answer). This again could be defined as a form of gambling.

It could also be argued that viewers who participate in “through the night” interactive quiz programming (like *The Mint*, *Make Your Play*, *The Great British Quiz*) may be some of the most vulnerable and susceptible. These viewers are more likely to be those who do not work and therefore be on low incomes and can least afford to participate (e.g., the young unemployed, the retired and elderly, etc.). Viewers may also be making decisions to play in a state where they are not fully alert at 3 a.m. They may also be participating because they think their chances of winning are better in the belief that there are very few other people awake at 4 a.m. In fact, this latter point highlights the fact that no-one participating has any idea what the odds are of winning.

Another gambling-like activity is participation in an online penny auction such as ‘*Madbid*’, ‘*Swoopo*’, ‘*Bid Boogie*’, ‘*Rapid Bargain*’ and ‘*Budson*’ (Griffiths 2008b). In order for a person to participate in an online penny auction, they need to place a bid in an ongoing auction. Bids can only be made in one penny increments. They can do this by (a) placing a bid by sending a text message from their mobile phone (at £1.50 a bid plus operator’s costs) or (b) placing a bid through the creation of an online account where the person buys a ‘bundle’ of bids (at 75p to £1.40 a bid depending on how big a bundle they buy in advance). To bid by text message, a person sends a message with the code for the specific product that they want to bid on. There is no limit to how many bids that can be

submitted on the same auction product. There is also no limit on how many different products can be bid on at any one time.

For example, Griffiths (2008b) described the instance where a *PlayStation* videogame console (retail price of £310) was won in a penny auction for £8.34. To the winner of the auction, this was won at a hugely discounted price. However, what this really meant was that there were 834 separate bids for this item all costing between 75p and £1.50 per bid (depending whether it was done online or via mobile phone). Most of the final 50 bids were made by just two individuals who—at a minimum—spent at least £30 in those final bids trying to secure the item. Although one person won the console, the other person spent a lot of money and got nothing. Rubin and Brockner (1975) have referred to this kind of “waiting game” situation as a type of gambling “entrapment”, because it becomes increasingly difficult for the gambler to exit the gambling situation after investing a significant period of time. Psychologically, this is also known as the ‘sunk cost bias’ and has been reported in relation to regular lottery gambling (Griffiths and Wood 2001). As with i-TV gaming, to what extent this very new activity with gambling-like experiences is affecting the youth population is as yet undetermined but that does not mean it should not be discussed as a potential issue of concern.

### New Gambling Media and Adolescent Gambling

The gambling literature has long suggested that young people are the most vulnerable subpopulation of gamblers (Delfabbro and Thrupp 2003). Nearly two decades ago, Lesieur and Rosenthal (1991) reported that adolescent problem gambling prevalence rates were more than double those of adults. More recently, it has been estimated that, in Great Britain, up to 6% of adolescents report significant pathological or problem patterns of gambling (Griffiths 2009), whereas 10–15% remain at risk of the development of severe gambling problems (Hardoon and Derevensky 2002). Comparable prevalence rates have been reported in other industrialised countries, such as the U.S. (Shaffer and Hall 1996), Canada (Poulin 2000) and Australia (Jackson et al. 2008). Adolescent gambling has also been linked to other delinquent behaviours, including criminal offences (Yeoman and Griffiths 1996), illicit drug taking (Griffiths and Sutherland 1998), and alcohol abuse (Barnes et al. 1999).

Research into adolescent gambling has made significant progress in the last decade, resulting in a number of key insights into the situational, environmental, and social contexts associated with adolescent gambling (Derevensky and Gupta 2007). It is understood that gambling is appealing for children and adolescents because it is stimulating and can alleviate painful emotional states (Jacobs 1986). These mood-altering effects may be particularly desirable during the emotionally turbulent time of puberty prior to the development of healthy, adaptive, coping skills (Gupta and Derevensky 1998). The literature has identified a number of risk factors associated with problem adolescent gambling. A selection of these factors will be discussed with regard to new gambling technologies to explain the various potential risks that they pose to adolescents. These factors are: (i) greater accessibility of gambling services in the community, (ii) involvement in gambling at an early age, (iii) experiencing a large win early in a gambling career, (iv) gambling when depressed or socially isolated, (v) peer approval and peer pressures to gamble, (vi) parental transmission of gambling attitudes and behaviours, and (vii) social acceptability of gambling. Each of these factors is briefly reviewed below.

## Greater Accessibility of Gambling Activities in the Community

New gambling media is accessible via the Internet on a personal computer and other digital devices, presenting a large variety of gambling options to adolescents. Whilst online gambling activities are intended for adults only, the adequacy of age verification measures to ensure younger players do not enter the sites illegally has been questioned (Griffiths 2003a). As mentioned earlier, many gambling websites have “free play” sections that adolescents are able to access and learn more about gambling. Gambling-like content can also be accessed in various non-monetary forms on mobile phones, video games, social networking sites, and interactive television. This makes gambling a more visible, attractive, and ubiquitous activity to adolescents. The broad accessibility of gambling also makes self-exclusion from gambling more difficult for vulnerable individuals and problem users.

## Involvement in Gambling at an Early Age

Gambling in early childhood has been linked to problem patterns of gambling in later life (Griffiths 2003b; Haroon and Derevensky 2001). It has been reported that adolescent probable pathological gamblers typically begin to gamble at the age of 9 or 10 years (Gupta and Derevensky 1998; Griffiths 2002). Unfortunately, due to the convergence of gambling with new digital media, there are few restrictions on what age children and adolescents are able to access gambling content. For example, many video games include games modelled on gambling games of chance, like poker and roulette. These gambling games may be problematic for adolescents because (a) they closely resemble the visual presentation and interactivity (and therefore “fun”) of video games to the point where they are virtually indistinguishable, (b) the notions of skill and luck are likely to be confused by children when gambling is presented in the context of a predominantly skill-based video game, (c) they ‘normalise’ gambling behaviour as a legitimate activity that children and adolescents can engage in (rather than being an adult leisure activity), and (d) they may positively socially condition children and adolescents, thus promoting and facilitating highly unrealistic notions and/or positive attitudes toward gambling.

## Experiencing a Large Win Early in a Gambling Career

Problem gamblers often report an experience of “winning big” or “hitting the jackpot” early in their gambling careers. It is thought that many problem gamblers are motivated by the desire to “re-live” this winning experience (Griffiths and Wood 2000). New gambling media has the potential to exploit novice gamblers such as adolescents by artificially creating a situation in which the player experiences an early big win. For instance, Sevigny et al. (2005) examined 117 online roulette sites and reported that 39% of sites provided inflated payout rates during the “demo” session of play, creating the impression that the game is highly profitable.

Once the player exits the trial period and plays with real money, the payout rates significantly decrease. In addition, some websites employ “pop-ups” or banner messages to promote false beliefs about notions of chance and randomness, by misrepresenting a person’s chance of winning a prize or depicting winning as the most probable outcome of gambling. These practices may be considered unethical to all types of players, but it should be stressed that adolescent gamblers may be more susceptible to being misled by (a) the inflated payout rate of the trial game and the implied message that their “good luck” will continue in the monetary version of the game, and (b) the factually incorrect and statistically

flawed advertising messages that promote erroneous beliefs and cognitive distortions regarding gambling odds and the nature of chance events (Griffiths 2005).

### Gambling When Depressed or Socially Isolated

Many adolescents who engage in problematic gambling behaviour report gambling to escape real life problems, such as emotional issues and social isolation (Gupta and Derevensky 2008). It is possible that adolescents who gamble using the Internet may experience additional problems due to the nature of the medium. Griffiths (1999) has stated that the Internet is characterised by (amongst other things) asociability, anonymity, disinhibition, immersion and stimulation. In other words, the Internet enables a unique context for adolescents, a place where they can gamble alone, take on a new identity that is unrelated to their real world self, and become immersed in a stimulating, interactive virtual world. Some studies have found that excessive Internet use is often associated with social isolation and depression (Moody 2001; Young and Rogers 1998). This suggests that adolescents who gamble online may be reinforcing the very problems that they are attempting to avoid.

### Peer Approval and Peer Pressures to Gamble

Social learning theory states that people learn behaviours by imitating others and receiving associated rewards for doing so (Bandura 1977). The theory has proven useful by explaining how adolescents can become involved in gambling by imitating parents and peers. Survey research has shown that 40% of adolescents participated in gambling activities because their friends were engaged in similar practices (Hardoon and Derevensky 2001). New gambling technologies facilitate peer approval and pressures to gamble in a number of ways. On Internet gambling sites, there are structural features that make the experience of gambling socially inclusive and highly competitive. For example, onscreen displays enable the player to see who is currently gambling online and access options to interact using voice-based and text-based messaging. There are also features that track significant player winnings and report these to other players to give the impression that players are constantly winning that may encourage the player to keep gambling because the next win may be “right around the corner”. The online environment also allows adolescents to interact with older, experienced gamblers with relative ease.

### Parental Transmission of Gambling Attitudes and Behaviours

It is thought that gambling parents “transmit” their gambling attitudes and habits to their children (Delfabbro and Thrupp 2003; Jacobs et al. 1989; Wood and Griffiths 2004). Presumably, the more frequently a parent gambles in the presence of a child, the more likely it is that the child will adopt gambling behaviours. Griffiths and Wood (2000) and Griffiths and Parke (2002) have argued that parental transmission of gambling may be assisted by the social trend called “cocooning” (i.e., the tendency for families to spend available leisure time inside the family home using electronic entertainment). The emergence of gambling within new technologies in the family home enables parents to not only gamble in the presence of their children but also to make gambling a potential family activity. This may greatly increase the likelihood that parents’ gambling attitudes and beliefs about gambling will be transmitted to their children (Griffiths and Parke 2002). A recent British adolescent

gambling survey found empirical evidence for this with 16% of adolescents who gambled online playing along with their parents (Griffiths and Wood 2007).

### Social Acceptability of Gambling

Gambling is highly socially acceptable, even considered to be a part of many countries' cultural identity (McMillen and Grabosky 1998). Gambling is widely accepted in large part because the activity is legalised and taxed by the government, it is advertised widely and easily accessible for nearly anyone, and often found in places that are glamorous and exciting. Surveys of parental attitudes to gambling show that 80–90% of parents do not appear to be concerned over their children's gambling behaviour and view gambling as a good social family activity (Ladouceur and Mireault 1988; Ladouceur et al. 2001). This has created a general difficulty in reconciling the opposing views that gambling represents both a social ill and a national pastime. As Gupta and Derevensky (1998) have stated, gambling is the “only addictive activity that youngsters are exposed to on a daily basis that is not counterbalanced by negative parental attitudes” (p. 341). As gambling becomes increasingly present within new and developing forms of electronic entertainment, it will become harder for legislators to identify and distinguish those forms of gambling which should be legally restricted.

### The Risks of Online Gambling

Online gambling has been reported to pose various risks to pathological gamblers and individuals who experience problems with gambling. Griffiths (2003a) stated that Internet gambling is characterised by greater accessibility and convenience, as gambling websites can be accessed from any Internet-enabled computer at any time of the day, all year round. Internet gambling is also more anonymous and asocial than traditional casinos, because online play enables a gambler to escape the shame and embarrassment of gambling losses and avoid being seen by others as a “problem” gambler.

Furthermore, an Internet gambler is able to incur losses at a faster rate due to the rapid pace of online gambling games. For example, online slot machines often feature a faster “reel spin” (i.e., higher event frequency), which enables the gambler to place more wagers (and typically lose more money) in a given time period. With respect to adolescent gambling, one of the major problems with Internet gambling is the difficulty in ensuring that adolescents do not access gambling websites in the home using the credit card of another family member such as a parent or older sibling (Griffiths and Wood 2000). Furthermore, there are some bank cards (such as *Electron* or *Solo* cards) that children as young as 12 years old can legally use (Smeaton and Griffiths 2004).

It has been reported that many adolescents who gamble commonly access the “free play” sections of online gambling sites (Derevensky and Gupta 2007; Griffiths and Wood 2007; Ipsos MORI 2009). Given the vulnerability of this subpopulation, the issue of social responsibility in Internet gambling is of great relevance.

A study by Smeaton and Griffiths (2004) examined the social responsibility practices of 30 U.K. online gambling sites. The researchers concluded that very few sites were engaged in socially responsible practices. The main findings indicated that: only half of the gaming operators did an initial age check of the player (15 out of 30); almost two-thirds did an age verification check of the player (19 out of 30); only a small minority did a credit check on the player (4 out of 30); most had credit limits for the players (27/30 had a maximum or

minimum limit; only a small minority made reference to controlled gambling (4 out of 30); only a small minority made a link to helping organisations and/or self-help groups? (4 out of 30); a third showed some evidence of social responsibility practices (10 out of 30); only one operator had a facility for gamblers who wanted to exclude themselves (1 out of 30); just over one-third had a facility to instantly exit during gambling (11 out of 30); one-third had a built-in pause and confirmation facility (10 out of 30); only one-sixth gave no encouragement to continue gambling (5 out of 30; most on border); and two-thirds gave players easy access to their account balance (20 out of 30). Of these factors, it may be speculated that the lack of age checking and poor credit card handling practices are the most significant problems for adolescent gambling. Inadequate age checks in particular have been shown to facilitate deception tactics in adolescent problem gambling (Poulin 2000). However, a recent review by Griffiths and Parke (in press) noted that many online gaming companies were improving in the area of age verification and prohibiting minors from gambling online.

### Classification of Gambling Content in Video Games

Another important issue that has received minimal attention is whether video games which feature gambling content (i.e., non-monetary gambling) should be classified as suitable for adolescents and children. Rich (2007) states that in the U.S., video game ratings are neither based in science nor assigned by child development experts; rather, an industry body provides classifications that are based mainly on dominant public opinion. For example, video games which feature graphic violence, sexual references and coarse language are given restricted classifications to prevent their sale to young people. However, gambling content is usually overlooked. For example, recent video game versions of gambling games, such as *Video Poker & Blackjack*, *World Series Poker*, and *World Championship Blackjack*, are deemed by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) as suitable for either “everyone” or “teen” audiences. In contrast, video games that feature depictions of alcohol and cigarette use, activities which are socially accepted and “addictive” like gambling, are given more restricted classification (Thompson et al. 2006).

In Australia, the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OLFC) follows guidelines which state that minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them. Further, the OFLC acknowledges the need to take account of “community concerns” including depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence, and the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner. Despite gambling research that shows that gambling is likely to harm adolescents at a much greater rate than adults, gambling references and gambling content are not specifically referred to within the guidelines.

### Summary

The vulnerability of young people places them at greater risk of problematic involvement in gambling. The introduction of gambling on the Internet and multiple forms of digital media has undoubtedly presented a number of risks for adolescents and children who gamble. However, the literature on this topic is relatively limited with regard to explaining how and to what extent adolescent gamblers have become involved in these new forms of gambling, and whether there are any risks associated with young people’s involvement in non-monetary forms of gambling such as video games. Future research is needed to study the impact

of these new technologies on adolescent development, particularly with regard to both the psychological and neurophysiological effects of these emergent forms of gambling.

There is also a variety of complex legal protection issues associated with new gambling technology, such as the adequacy of age checking and credit card security measures in online casinos. These issues directly affect adolescent gambling practices and deserve further debate and empirical research. Future research can aid governments in devising relevant and pragmatic social policy responses to the problem of adolescent online gambling. These responses may involve various strategies, including monitoring gambling advertising on the Internet and examining how these messages may affect youth, developing a research agenda focussed on adolescent online gambling, and supporting health authorities in their campaigns to reduce the adoption and maintenance of gambling behaviour among adolescents. Ultimately, legislators and policy makers are the ones who decide to what extent young people should be protected from potentially harmful activities like interactive online gambling, and to impose measures that do not compromise the consensual experiences of gambling adults.

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