

# Opinion: There's no such thing as a natural-born gambler

April 25 2016, by Anthony J. Pickles, University Of Cambridge

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Not our natural habitat. Risk and money go hand in hand. Credit: EPA/STR

The fight to recruit online gamblers in the UK is at fever pitch. If you googled "play live blackjack" in March, it cost an advertiser £148.51 to be the first ad that came up. In fact, 77 of March's top 100 most

expensive keywords [were about gambling](#). With this relentless clamour to grab attention, you might think gambling was hardwired into human nature; that we were doomed to cave in to the enticements of bookmakers and casinos.

In truth, huge swathes of the planet just didn't gamble. No cards, no dice, not even a coin flip, and we're not talking about a thousand years ago either; in some areas it is just 50 years since gambling arrived. We can say with confidence that 150 years ago betting on contests was absent from the indigenous peoples of most of South America, almost all of Australia, most of the Pacific Islands including the vast islands comprising New Guinea and New Zealand, most Inuit and Siberian peoples, and a great many peoples of [southern Africa](#).

My own fieldwork in Highland Papua New Guinea showed the introduction of gambling occurred [in the 1950s](#) – in other words, within living memory. If whole populations don't or didn't gamble, well it can't very well be a universal human trait. So why didn't they?

Those looking for an easy answer would say that these people were isolated and marginal, but we know that was not the case at all. For instance, there have been huge polities [spanning the Amazon](#), and trade networks that bridged the Pacific [well before Captain Cook](#). How easy it would have been to pick up some dice, or make them when you got home.

## **Risk aversion**

You might well counter that these people were just isolated from "us". In fact, contact with the West and the presence of gambling just [don't correlate](#).

But lets say that non-gamblers were too far removed from the great

gambling traditions to pick it up directly, despite the evidence. The enormous variety of gambling and the breadth of forms it has taken across the world both [in the past](#) and [today](#) strongly suggests that gambling is not a hard idea to invent. The real question should therefore be why was gambling not worth inventing or adopting? Under what conditions is gambling a silly idea?

Another piece of common wisdom says that gambling is more prevalent among people who face greater risk in their lives, but this is [not the answer either](#). While the correlation holds for some people in some countries that already gamble, many of the peoples who didn't gamble at all had a far riskier time of things than peoples who do.

So there is nothing innate about gambling that simply must bubble to the surface, but this doesn't mean gambling addiction is not real or serious either. Many of those [indigenous peoples](#) who once didn't gamble now have [very high levels of problem gambling](#). It is one thing to say gambling is not in our genes, and quite another to say that some people aren't predisposed to develop a dependency on gambling when it is around them.

If it wasn't isolation, and it wasn't lack of risk, or lack of imagination, why have many of us gambled so much while many others who didn't at all have now taken it up so quickly? Simple. We have money and a stratified society with a lot of [economic inequality](#) and they didn't.

## **Easy money**

Money may seem a self-evident thing, but it is surprisingly hard to make a hard and fast distinction between what we all know to be money and [things like shell currencies](#). Like money itself, its definition can easily slip through our fingers. What people who have adopted money tell anthropologists, however, is that what matters is that money has more

uses, is more portable, more easily hidden, and [easier to spend](#). Many people in those societies that were new to money took up gambling as a way to access or direct this slippery new kind of wealth.

Inequality is another good indicator for gambling, both [statistically](#) and [on the ground](#). Where I did my fieldwork, gambling arrived with the return of the first migrant labourers, young men who, along with a knowledge of gambling, brought back what seemed like huge wealth, and who had the potential to upend traditional [hierarchies](#).

As with so many non-gambling societies, it was new inequalities that made gambling seem a good idea for some. And for all its problems, one has to admit that it is a very exploratory, profound way to engage with money. In gambling, by mutual agreement, players pit their monies against each other, making less into more (or more into less) while cutting out the laborious market system. This also explains why [Mao Tse-Tung](#) and the leaders of so many other communist (read anti-inequality) uprisings made banning gambling a first priority.

## Joining the game

What does all this tell us about our lust for [online gambling](#), which seems so lucrative for Google as well as the betting firms? We have been gambling for a long time, long enough for it to seep into our collective psyche and appear completely natural, but as recently as medieval times our kings blamed our gambling on [French influence](#).

We have gone through fits and spurts of gambling, but probably the most important was in the [17th century](#), when mercantilism upset the economic order of the day, while new forms of accurate measurement and a more widespread currency system spurred us to think more in numbers, bending our minds towards gambling.

It is certainly profitable for the [gambling](#) industry that we think of ourselves as a nation of instinctive gamblers. But think again. That the risk taker in us becomes an online gambler tells us much more about how we internalise present day economic inequality and the way technology makes [money](#) ever easier to spend than it does about our animal instincts.

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