

# Giving video games this Christmas? New research underlines need to be aware of loot box risks

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Recent controversy has surrounded the concept of loot boxes—the purchasable video game features that offer randomized rewards but are

not governed by gambling laws.

Now research led by the University of Plymouth has shown that at-risk individuals, such as those with known gaming and [gambling](#) problems, are more likely to engage with [loot boxes](#) than those without.

The study is one of the largest, most complex and robustly designed surveys yet conducted on loot boxes, and has prompted experts to reiterate the call for stricter enforcement around them.

Existing studies have [shown](#) that the items are structurally and psychologically akin to gambling but, despite the evidence, they still remain accessible to children.

The new findings, which add to the evidence base linking loot boxes to gambling, are [published](#) in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*.

The surveys captured the thoughts of 1,495 loot box–purchasing gamers, and 1,223 gamers who purchase other, non-randomized game content.

They highlighted that taking the risk of opening a loot box was associated with people who had experienced problem gambling, problem gaming, impulsivity and gambling cognitions—including the perceived inability to stop buying them.

It also showed that any financial or psychological impacts from loot box purchasing are liable to disproportionately affect various at-risk cohorts, such as those who have previously had issues with gambling.

Lead author Dr. James Close, Lecturer in Clinical Education at the University of Plymouth, said, "Loot boxes are paid-for rewards in video games, but the gamer does not know what's inside. With the risk/reward mindset and behaviors associated with accessing loot boxes, we know

there are similarities with gambling, and these new papers provide a longer, more robust description exploring the complexities of the issue."

"Among the findings, the work shows that loot box use is driven by beliefs such as 'I'll win in a minute'—which really echoes the psychology we see in gambling. The studies contribute to a substantial body of evidence establishing that, for some, loot boxes can lead to financial and psychological harm. However, it's not about making loot boxes illegal, but ensuring that their impact is understood as akin to gambling, and that policies are in place to ensure consumers are protected from these harms."

The research was conducted alongside the University of Wolverhampton and other collaborators.

An earlier paper from this study also found evidence that under-18s who engaged with loot boxes progressed onto other forms of gambling. The overall findings remain consistent with narratives that policy action on loot boxes will take steps to minimize harm in future.

Co-lead Dr. Stuart Spicer, PenARC Research Fellow in the University of Plymouth's Peninsula Medical School, added, "We know loot boxes have attracted a lot of controversy and the UK government has adopted an approach of industry self-regulation. However, industry compliance to [safety features](#) is currently unsatisfactory, and there is a pressing need to see tangible results."

"Our research adds to the evidence base that they pose a problem for at-risk groups, such as people with dysfunctional thoughts about gambling, [lower income](#), and problematic levels of video gaming. We really hope that these findings will add to the [evidence base](#) showing the link between loot boxes, gambling, and other risky behaviors, and that there will be more of a push to take action and minimize harm."

**More information:** Exploring the relationships between psychological variables and loot box engagement, part 1: pre-registered hypotheses, *Royal Society Open Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.231045](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.231045).  
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