

Lure of the 'loot box' looks a lot like gambling

May 1 2019



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An increasingly popular feature of modern video games is attracting gamers who share the beliefs and behaviours of problem gamblers, new UBC research has found.

Gamers who are drawn to "loot boxes"—randomly generated prizes of undisclosed value that can be attained or purchased within a [game](#)—bear a closer resemblance to [problem gamblers](#) than they do to problem gamers, according to the study published April 16 in *Addictive Behaviors*.

"Our study is among the first to investigate the links between loot boxes and [gambling](#)," said Gabriel Brooks, a Ph.D. student from UBC's Centre for Gambling Research and lead author of the study. "Our findings are consistent with voiced concerns that loot boxes overlap with gambling, and support the need for regulators to consider gambling-like mechanisms within [video](#) games."

Loot boxes began appearing in video games in the mid-2000s and have grown in popularity since. In some cases, players earn them as rewards for [game play](#), but players are often encouraged to buy them using real or virtual currency. Players typically do not know what they are getting in a loot box until they open it. It may contain a new outfit for the player's character to wear, for example, or a new weapon for them to use. Often, the most desired prizes are the most rare.

Game developers frequently use loot box sales to monetize free mobile games, and some games have associated online marketplaces where players can trade or sell the items, establishing a monetary value.

For the study, researchers developed five questions designed to measure excessive or risky use of loot boxes. The participating gamers, all North Americans of at least university age, assessed themselves based on statements such as: "I frequently play games longer than I intend to, so I can earn loot boxes" or "I have bought more loot boxes after failing to receive valuable items."

Participants also completed surveys that are commonly used in gambling

research to assess gambling behaviour, beliefs about gambling, and risk-taking behaviour, as well as a newer survey designed to identify problem video gaming.

When the researchers analyzed the scores, they found a correlation between excessive engagement with loot boxes and measures of problem gambling, supporting the view that loot boxes are a 'gamblified' feature of modern video games. They found a smaller correlation between loot boxes and problem video gaming.

While the data shows significant overlap between risky loot box use and gambling behaviours, it does not indicate whether one causes the other. It's possible that people predisposed to problem gambling are particularly vulnerable to loot boxes, but it may also be that loot box use leads to risky gambling behaviours.

"Our data involved adult gamers," said Brooks. "There has been substantial concern regarding the impact of loot boxes upon youth. Studying youth exposure to loot box mechanisms would be a logical next step."

About 90 per cent of participants reported that they had opened a loot box in a [video game](#). More than half reported spending money on them, and about one-third reported having sold a loot box item.

More information: Gabriel A. Brooks et al, Associations between loot box use, problematic gaming and gambling, and gambling-related cognitions, *Addictive Behaviors* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.04.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.04.009)

Provided by University of British Columbia

Citation: Lure of the 'loot box' looks a lot like gambling (2019, May 1) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-lure-loot-lot-gambling.html>

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