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Should Loot Boxes in Games Be Treated as Gambling?

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Video game loot boxes have come under fire in recent years for their similarity to gambling and the risks they pose to children and vulnerable players. They're the latest big problem in the gaming industry, prompting uproar among consumers who believe that the laws surrounding loot boxes should be more regimented. The House of Commons has [recently called](#) for children to be banned from purchasing loot boxes in the UK, but are they right in putting loot boxes in the same category as traditional gambling or is this a step too far?

What are Loot Boxes?

Loot boxes are an in-game reward that offers users a randomised selection of items that players can buy or earn. The trick behind these digital grab bags is that players don't know what is going to be inside, which essentially makes them a slot machine in an [online casino](#). They may get lucky or it might be something valueless that doesn't really enhance the user experience, and different games have different types of rewards, from sought-after players in team games to better weapons for using throughout the game. If they're purchased for real money, the committee states that they should at least be marketed as containing gambling and be age-sensitive as a result. The recommendation for treating loot boxes as gambling comes as part of the digital, culture, media and sport committee's claims that these features form part of an addictive technology.

The Value of Loot Boxes

Loot boxes include an element of chance, as the players buying them don't know for certain what they will receive but they're not covered by existing gambling legislation as the items won don't have monetary value. However, there are reports that loot box winnings have been exchanged for money in some cases which results in developers facilitating in profiting from problem gamblers. [A third of children are believed to have paid for loot boxes](#) too, with one gamer reportedly spending upwards of £1000 a year in order to gain better players for his team in the FIFA game.

Elsewhere in Europe, other countries have already banned loot boxes for the damaging effect they can have on children and vulnerable adults. But loot boxes are difficult to classify in terms of gambling because of the digital nature of the prizes and the fact that money isn't always involved, which makes them tricky to police. Gambling is described as playing a game of chance for a prize and there are definite circumstances in which loot boxes fall into this category. However, the definition of a prize is less clear-cut, particularly when the prize is defined as money or money's worth.

Loot boxes have become a lucrative feature for game developers but for problem gamblers and parents of children who play these games, they pose a risk. Buying a loot box may be a game of chance but it can lead to problems further down the line and many are calling for tighter laws and regulations on games in order to prevent the ripple effect becoming too large.

Image:  Glenn Carstens-Peters

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